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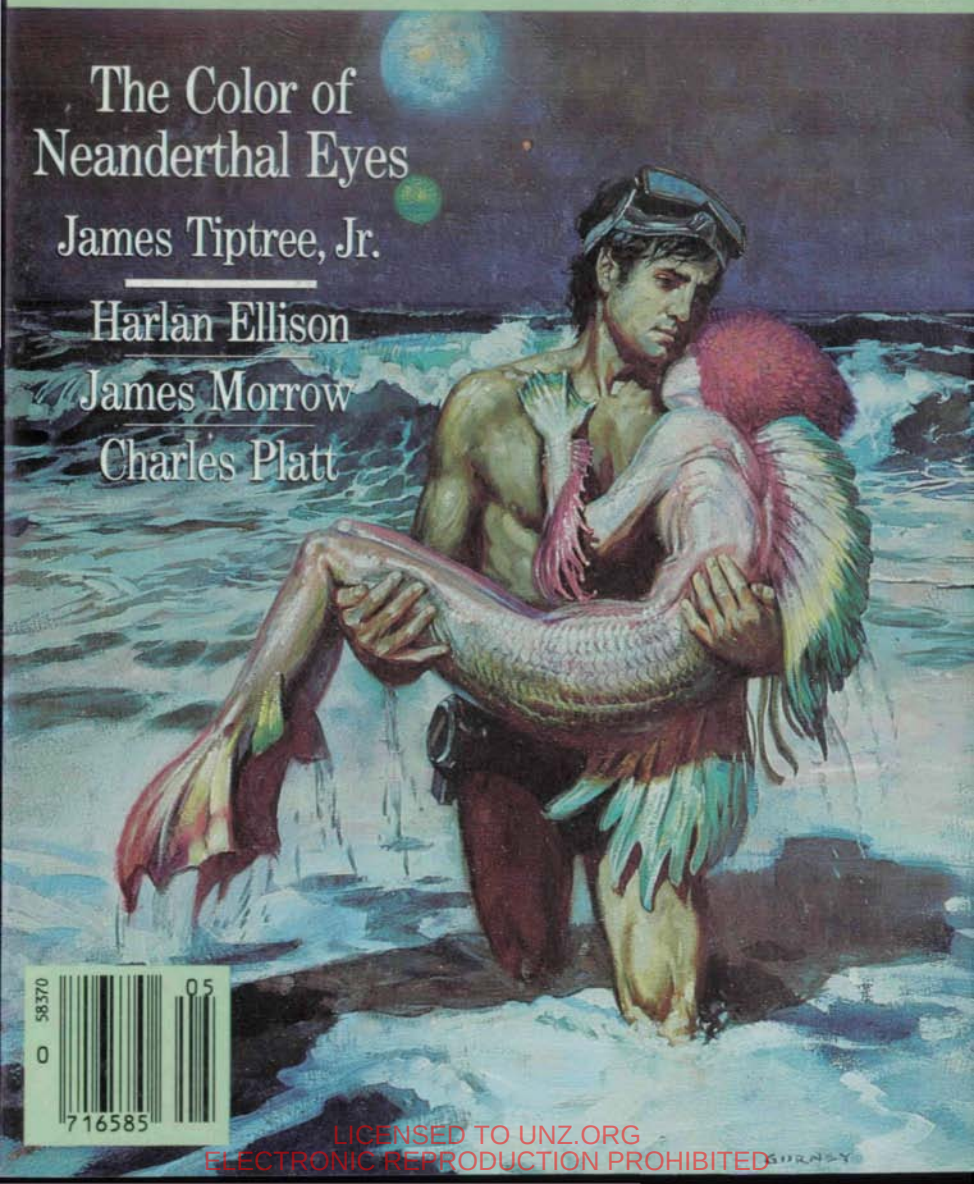
The Color of Neanderthal Eyes

James Tiptree, Jr.

Harlan Ellison

James Morrow

Charles Platt



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THE
TEAM SPECTRA
REPORT

We probably shouldn't be telling you this, but when we acquired Richard Grant's novel **Rumors of Spring** (then called **Prelude and Forest**), we didn't really have any idea what it was about. But the fact was that the hundred or so sample pages which came from Richard's agent were *so* brilliantly written that we knew we needed to have this rare, wonderful talent on the Spectra list. So we signed it up and then called Richard to ask him if he could tell us where all of these incredible sentences were leading.

They certainly were leading somewhere. And when the final manuscript for **Rumors of Spring** came in, it was humming with energy and the story line became not only cohesive, but utterly enthralling. The tale of the crusade of a band of unlikely allies to the last rebellious forest on Earth, it is the kind of warm, intelligent, totally absorbing fantasy novel one sees all too infrequently. We fell in love with it immediately.

Lots of other people discovered how wonderful **Rumors of Spring** was when we published it in hardcover and trade paperback last year. The *Los Angeles Daily News* called it "a rare and marvelous tale." The *San Francisco Examiner* said it was "wry, hilarious and humane...a joy." The *Austin American-Statesman* dubbed it "a warm near-future fantasy...ably demonstrates Grant's abilities in what might be called the Ray Bradbury school of fantasy," and the *Philadelphia Daily News* said "like all good myths, **Rumors of Spring** is rooted in a rich soil of realism. It is a wise and compassionate tale." The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* simply called it "delightful." And *Fantasy Review* really caught the essence of the reading experience when it said, "Richard Grant's prose is such that I kept stopping to think over an idea, or reread a certain turn of phrase or bit of description, simply because it was so good. If you enjoyed the way John Crowley pulled so many diverse elements so seamlessly together in **Little, Big**, then this book is for you."

You might be familiar with Richard Grant from his first novel, **Saraband of Lost Time**, which was the runner-up for the Philip K. Dick Award. But whether you've read him before or not, do yourself the favor of reading **Rumors of Spring**. It's a simply extraordinary experience.

Enjoy,
TEAM SPECTRA

SPECTRA BANTAM

RUMORS OF SPRING
by Richard Grant
now in mass market paperback

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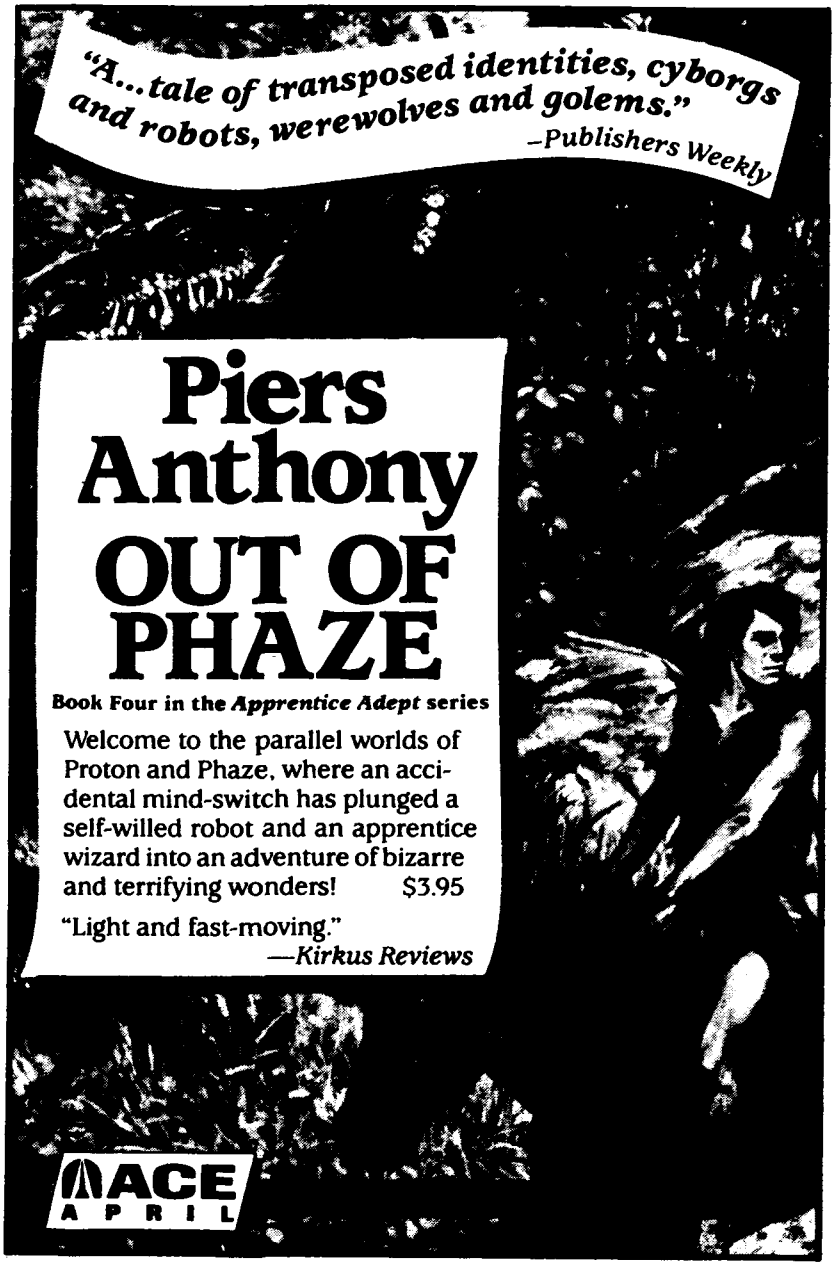
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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 74, No. 5, Whole No. 444, May 1988. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $1.75 per copy. Annual subscription $19.50; $23.50 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 30%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56 Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1988 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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In This Issue

WE POINT you toward three special items in the May issue. First to a new column, "Inside Science Fiction," which will tell you what's doing in the real world of SF whenever we find anything of interest to report. Here we cover something billed as a "once in a lifetime auction of a legendary science fiction collection." The column will appear at irregular intervals but, we trust, will be consistently entertaining.

It will be in the hands of Charles Platt, who has been writing SF since dropping out of Cambridge in 1963. He moved from London to New York City in 1970. Mr. Platt has long been one of the most lucid and undiplomatic observers of the SF scene, and his two volumes of interviews with SF authors (DREAM MAKERS, Berkley) are among the best books ever written about science fiction.

"The Woman in the Wood" by Andrew Klavan is — let's admit it up front — a long poem. We never publish long poems, and so you should infer, correctly, that this one is something special. It is also exciting reading, and we hope you will not avoid it simply because it is a poem.

"The Color of Neanderthal Eyes" is our feature story, and it is the last story we will publish from long time contributor Alice Sheldon, who wrote science fiction for more than twenty years under the name James Tiptree, Jr. In a tragedy that shocked more than the SF community, Mrs. Sheldon killed her ailing husband and then herself in May 1987. There will be nothing further from "James Tiptree, Jr." in these pages, but this inventive, muscular SF novella is exactly the sort of tale Alice Sheldon would have picked to say goodbye.

Coming Soon

Next month: a new Kedrigern story, "Mirror, Mirror, Off the Wall" by John Morressy and a wonderfully different novella from Bradley Denton titled "The Calvin Coolidge Home for Dead Comedians."

Soon: A brand new short story by Harlan Ellison, his first in a year, "Eidolons."

— E.L.F.

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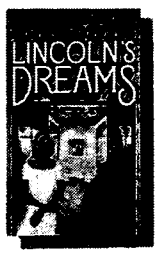
THE
TEAM SPECTRA
REPORT

It turns out that everyone was right about Connie Willis's ability to write a great first novel. Though one was hardly taking one of the Major Risks of Our Time by suggesting that she would do so. After all, she had already proven with her short fiction that she was among the most intelligent and thoughtful writers our field had seen in years. Her story collection, Fire Watch, was even listed as one of the *New York Times* notable books of 1985. So even though some writers have a difficult time making the transition from short fiction to novels, no one doubted for a second that Connie would do so gracefully and brilliantly (at least no one told *us* so).

Well, as we said, everyone was right. This breathtaking novel of a young woman whose dreams take her on an emotional odyssey through the heartland of the Civil War was raved about from coast to coast when we published it in hardcover. The *San Francisco Chronicle* used words like "tantalizing" and "fascinating" and "impeccable." The *Washington Post Book World* called it "a novel of classical proportions and virtues." *The New York Times Book Review* said it was "a love story on more than one level, and Ms. Willis does justice to them all. It was only toward the end of the book that I realized how much tension had been generated, how engrossed I was in the characters, how much I cared about their fates." And the *Denver Post* commented that "the revelation at the end is the most poignant moment in a book crammed with poignancy."

Connie's fellow writers were quick to lavish praise upon her as well. Richard Adams called Lincoln's Dreams "moving and beautiful...a most original and fascinating novel." Cecelia Holland called it "a powerful reading experience. It moved me beyond my ability to say." "Suspenseful, thought-provoking, and poignant," were the words Michael Bishop used to describe it. And Harlan Ellison suggested that "to enjoy Ms. Willis's work is only common sense; to miss Lincoln's Dreams is to risk the loss of your immortal soul."

We are very happy to be the publishers of Connie Willis's first novel Lincoln's Dreams. It's as good as everyone knew it would be.



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This is the second of the two stories we received shortly before the death of James Tiptree, Jr. in May 1987 (the first was "In Midst of Life," November 1987). It is about a telepath named Tom Jared, who is stranded on a beautiful sea world, and his relationship with the gentle natives, who are faced with an all too familiar threat and are offered an inevitable solution. . .

THE COLOR OF NEANDERTHAL EYES

By James Tiptree, Jr.

IT'S MY FAULT, ALL OF IT, and Kamir is dead. But something must be done.

Now it is afterward, and I am recording this on shipboard so that you will understand. Much of this belongs in a Second Contact Report. Much more does not. But I am too torn-up and tired to make a formal report. I am simply talking out what happened so you will see that something must be done.

It started while I was lazily cruising along just outside an island coral reef, on the beautiful sea world unimaginatively christened "Wet." I see it now: turquoise sea and creamy small breakers, and across the green bay the snowy expanse of sand, backed by the feathery plumes of that papyrus-like plant I learned to call *cenya*. The sun has started down, so I start my motor and go along the reef, looking for a pass. I find one, and cautiously

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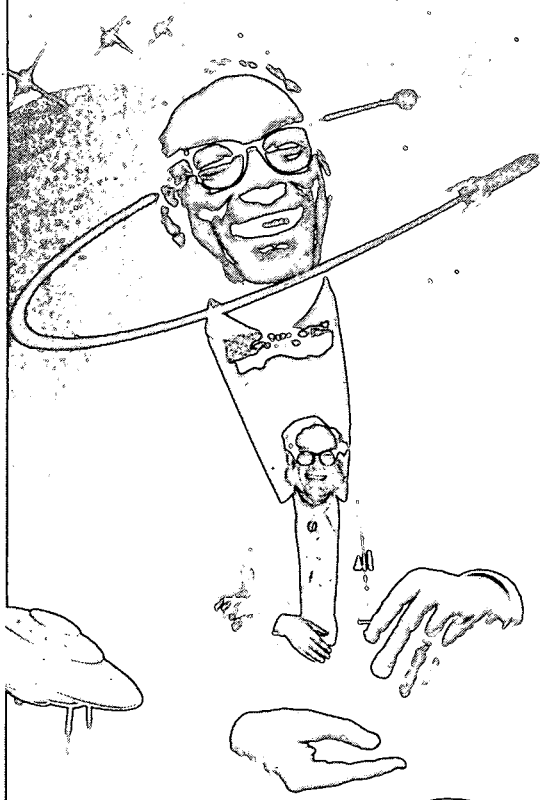
By Isaac Asimov



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zigzag through; my little new-rubber dinghy is too precious to risk hitting that sharp coral. Once through, I stop and turn, watching. Something has been following me all afternoon. I don't want to spend the night alone on a strange beach without checking out the creature.

Will it follow me in here?

I am, so far as I know, alone on Wet. And I'm tired. I'd been on a very strenuous yearlong tour as Sensitive on an Extended Contact party six lights away. It's hard work, building up an FVV — First Verbal Vocabulary — and the aliens I was dealing with had complicated, irritable, niggling minds. The niggling made for an accurate vocabulary, but it was tiring for the lone telepath on the team. And it was a high-gee planet, which made for more fatigue. I had earned my post-tour leave. When we passed near Wet, I opted to be put down in a lander for weeks of restful solitude.

Wet has been visited only once before, by a loner named Pforzheimer, who stayed only long enough to claim a First Contact. His notes in the *Ephemeris* say that there are humanoid natives, confined to the one small continent, or large island, on the other side of the planet from me. Besides that, what land there is consists of zillions of small islands and islets, mostly atolls, long, looping chains of them everywhere, archipelagoes forming necklaces around friendly seas.

Wet seems to be in an interglacial period, with the ocean at maximal height and only a tiny ice cap on the south pole. And its sun is yellow, like Sol but smaller, so that even here near the equator, the noon heat is merely pleasant. A tropical paradise in this season. There is even a magnetic field; my compass works. I left the lander at my base camp due south, and have come exploring this pretty chain of islets.

Ah!

In the pass I am watching, there bobs up a round head, rather like a seal, but glinting a fiery pink in the sunlight. The creature is following me into the bay.

What to do? Is it a predator? If so, it has had plenty of chances to make for me while I was diving, but did nothing. More important, is it a marine animal or an amphibian? Much of Wet's wildlife seems to be amphibious, their lives and bodies undecided between sea and land — a natural development here. If my follower stays in the sea, well and good; but if it comes ashore, I won't have a reposeful night.

As I look, the head swivels, apparently spots me, and submerges again.

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A ripple in the water shows it coming on in. I float quietly, undecided. Perhaps it is merely curious. That might imply high intelligence. But what persistence! It has been around me, now near, now farther off, since noon. What should I do?

Then something happens! A swirl in the water behind the creature, and a glimpse of something white. I have a notion what it is — one of the giant white crabs I have seen (and avoided) on the reefs. Our passage must have attracted it.

At this moment the creature accelerates to a very respectable speed, and heads straight toward me. The swirl of the crab accelerates, too. I receive a mental flash of excitement, mixed with a trace of fear. Clearly, the creature is racing to get away from the crab; but why toward me? Does it feel I am somehow a refuge?

I check my impulse to start my motor and take myself out of the path; I feel responsible for my follower's plight.

I shilly-shally until there is a commotion in the water alongside. The alien creature has arrived right by me. Then two pale green arms shoot out of the water and grasp the dinghy, and, so suddenly I have no time to react, the creature boosts itself up and tumbles into the bow of the boat — with a startling Human laugh!

Can it be Human? No — a humanoid, I see as I get a better look at its waving feet. Long, membranous flippers are folding themselves around its toes, and the fingers are webbed. But the form is Human — quite beautifully so, I notice. And the creature is sending out a wave of excited pleasure.

I have evidently encountered the hominid inhabitants of Wet.

My first reaction is — damn it all. I'm in no condition to exercise my special talents, to do a Contact routine. But somehow the laugh beguiles me. I don't need to do more than a minimal scan to grasp that my visitor is in no way hostile.

But there's no time for more — a big white pincer crab claw has lashed across the boat and is coming at the alien. I fumble for my harpoon.

Before I can find it, the situation is solved. Still laughing, the alien expertly grasps the claw and whips out a shell knife from its belt — yes, it is wearing a belt and loincloth — and runs the knife down the claw, severing its "thumb," or lower pincer. The "thumb" drops to the bottom of the boat, the now-harmless claw batters about a bit, and a second, smaller,

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claw comes aboard. The process of de-thumbing is repeated. For a moment both ex-pincers are battering and waving, and then the great crab, seeming to grasp its trouble, gives up and slides back into the sea.

The alien, grinning, bends and retrieves the thumbs, shaking its flaming red hair back from its face. With its knife, it scoops the meat out of their shells, and leans aft. It is offering one claw-meat to me! I take it, puzzled. It is like a big white banana.

The alien pops the other piece into its mouth and bites, nodding and smiling at me. Good! Cautiously, I taste it without swallowing. It is delicious — but alien food like this can contain an infinity of hazards. The crab's flesh could be laced with something lethal to me — as simple as arsenic — to which the locals are immune.

Regretfully, I lay the luscious white meat down on a thwart and gear my mind up to communicate the thought, "Thank you. It is very good. But we are very different. I come from another world."

To my inexpressible surprise and relief, the alien, its deep-blue eyes fixed on mine, sends back, "I know, I know." So they are natural telepaths! How rare, how wonderful!

And more is coming: "Other one came from the sky a long time past." A foggy picture of what must have been Pforzheimer forms in my head, evidently a passed-on image. "Are you like that?"

Mind-questions are hard to ask. The alien does it by superimposing a figure I see is me, and flashing back and forth fast to the Pforzheimer image with an eager feel. "Yes," I send. "We come from the same world."

The alien eats more crabmeat, considering this.

Then comes another, more complex question I don't get. Foggy flashing images of Pforzheimer opening and shutting his mouth, blurry pictures of what might be planets of different sizes and colors . . . "Many worlds. . . ." I am roused to make the effort to probe for the alien's verbal speech, and try a guess.

"You say, the other-one-like-me said there are many worlds, many peoples?"

Enthusiastic assent. I've hit it.

And from then on, we converse in an irreproducible mix of verbal and transmitted speech, unmatched for fluency and ease. I report it here as close as purely spoken speech can come.

"Yes, that's true," I tell the alien. "There are many races. Some stay

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on their worlds; others travel much — like me."

The alien smiles broadly, the blue eyes in what I realize is a very beautiful face bright with pleasure. He snuggles down into a comfortable position in the bow, reaching for my rejected crab claw.

"Show me! Show me all!"

He is evidently prepared for a long session of entertainment. But the sunset is casting great golden rays across the sky, tinting the flocks of little island-born cumuli and generating lavender shadows on the blue-green sea. I must prepare for the night.

"Too many to show all. Too many to know all. I will show you one, others later. The night comes."

"Yes, I know how you do in the night. You take this" — he slaps the boat with the knife — "onto land, and sleep. I have watched you for two days." There is a smile of mischief in his blue eyes.

What? But I spotted him only this noon. However, I recall some vague impressions of sentience nearby that had caused me momentary disquiet. So that's what they were — emanations of my new acquaintance, watching!

"Good. Here is one other world." I send a nice, detailed view of the fiery planet of the Comenor, with a few of its highly intelligent natives hopping around or resting alertly, tripedal, on their large, kangaroolike tails. The Comenor had been one of the races I trained on.

"Ah! And they think, they speak? Do they make music?" The alien raises its voice in a provocative little chant.

"Yes . . . yes . . . let me remember —" I try to render one of the Comenor's pastoral airs.

"Hm'm. . . ."

As he sits there reflecting, with the golden light playing on his flaming hair, I realize I may be mistaken. I have been calling him "he" because of his breastless body, flat belly, and slim hips, and perhaps also because he is apparently alone in the open sea. But that face could belong to a beautiful woman. And he is *not* Human; there is a strange fold running down the throat, and the pupils of his eyes are hourglass shaped. Nor is he even mammalian; no nipples mar the pale green curves of his pectoral muscles, although he has a small navel. Perhaps "he" is female, or epicene; perhaps it is the custom of his race for females to wander far alone. Whatever, my new friend is enchanting to look at; even his accoutrements of knife,

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belt, and loincloth are charmingly carved and decorated.

"Wonderful," he says at length. "And you have seen this and more!"

"Yes."

"I would like to do so."

"It might be possible, someday. Maybe. But now I must go ashore." I send him an image of himself getting out of the boat so I can drive the bow up the beach.

"Yes, I know." Again the hint of mischief in the smile. He pops the remains of the crab claw in his belt, and in one graceful flash is overboard. As he sails past, I glimpse that strange fold on his neck opening to show a feathery purple lining. Gills! So he is truly aquatic. No wonder I didn't see him until he decided to show.

I start the motor and examine the beach. As often here, a small stream meanders to the bay in its center, marked by clumps of the tall, plumy papyruslike plants. I'll have fresh water to top off my canteens.

I chose the large expanse of beach and head for its center, where I'll have maximum warning if anything approaches. I've searched inland on several atolls, and so far found no sign of any predators — indeed, of anything larger than a kind of hopping mouse and a wealth of attractive semibirds. But I'd prefer not to have even hop-mice investigate me in the night.

I rush the dinghy up a smooth place, jump out, and drag it beyond the tide line. There are low, frequent tides in this part of Wet, generated by a trio of little moons that sail across the sky three times a night, revolving around each other. Like everything else here, they are attractive — one is sulfur-yellow, another rusty pink, the third a blue-white.

The alien offers to help me with the boat, I warn him about punctures and letting the air out. He steps back warily.

"Thank you."

When I detach the motor and batteries, he comes to examine them.

"More wonders. How does this work?"

"Later, later." I am puffing with exertion as I take out all my gear and turn the boat over to make a bed, hopefully out of reach of the little nocturnal crabs and lizards on these beaches. The alien watches everything closely, nodding to himself. When I have dried the dinghy's bottom and laid out my sleep shelter, he sits down on the sand alongside.

"Now you will —" Quick images of me relieving myself among the

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papyrus and returning to sit on the boat and eat.

I laugh; the pictures are deft cartoons, emphasizing our mutual differences and also the — I fear — growing plumpness around my belt.

"Yes. And I fill my canteens. The beach last night had no fresh water."

"Good. I, too, will eat." He opens his belt pouch and extracts the crabmeat, together with two neatly cleaned little reef fish. Raw fish must be a staple here.

When I return, he is still delicately eating. I offer him water but it is refused. "You don't need fresh water after such a long time in the salt sea?"

"Oh no." I reflect that their bodies must have solved the problem of osmosis, which dehydrates seagoing Humans. Perhaps that beautiful pale greenish, velvety-looking skin is in fact some sort of osmotic organ.

I settle down with my food bars, enjoying the unmistakable sense of companionship that emanates from the alien. We are both examining each other between bites, and I find that his smile is contagious; I am grinning, too. Extraordinary! Especially after my last aliens.

Now I can see more signs of his — or her — aquatic origins. A rudimentary, charmingly tinted dorsal fin shows at the back of his neck, running down his spine to surface again just above its end. There is a frilly little fin on the outside of each wrist. All these fishlike trappings fold away neatly when not in use. The flipper-fins on his feet fold over the toes so as to appear merely decoration. And his hair isn't true hair, I see, but more like the very thin tendrils of a rosy anemone; a sensory organ, perhaps. Am I seeing a member of a race that has evolved directly from fishes? I think so; these appendages look more like evolutionary remnants than new developments to my untrained eye. He is on his way out of, rather than back to, the sea. But could he be cold-blooded? No; when our bodies had brushed together, I had felt solid warmth under the thick, cool integument.

But perhaps he is not "on his way" at all; on this world, his adaptations seem perfect. There is every reason to retain his aquatic features, and none at all to lose them. I think I am seeing a culminant form, which will not change much, at least from natural pressures.

He, for his part, is looking me over with care.

"You do not swim well," he concludes, extending one foot and flicking the flippers open.

"No, but we have these." I reach under the dinghy and pull out my

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swim fins to show him. He laughs appreciatively, and I reflect that my race, like seals, *is* returning to the sea — by prosthesis.

"My world has much dry land," I explain. "My race grew up from land animals who never went to sea." What am I doing, assuming a grasp of evolution theory on the part of one whose mind may be not much more than a fish's? Yet he seems to understand.

"Wonders," he smiles.

Next he is fascinated by my teeth. I show him all I can, and he in turn displays the ridges of hard white cartilage I had taken for teeth.

And so we pass the evening, chatting like amiable strangers, while the golden sun turns red and sinks, silhouetting the fronds of the papyrus. We exchange names late, as is customary with telepaths. His is Kamir. He has a little trouble with mine, Tom Jared. His people, he tells me, are three days' travel away, to the east. Why is he alone? That one is difficult; I can only guess that he means he is exploring for pleasure. "It is the custom."

Somehow I cannot bring myself to take up the question of sex, even though I know he is curious, too; once or twice I catch a tendril of his thought lingering around my swim trunks.

But through all our talk, I am amazed by what can only be called its courtesy. Its civility. Never do I strike a hostile or "primitive" reaction. It is a little like being questioned by a bright, well-brought-up child. Innocence, curiosity, those are neotenic — childlike — traits. Neoteny has been a feature of Human development. Kamir's race is neotenic, too. But beyond that, he is indefinably but unmistakably *civilized.* Whatever may turn out to be his technological level, I am communing with a civilized mind.

It grows darker, and a myriad unknown stars come out. I grow sleepy, despite the interest of the occasion. Kamir notices it.

"Now you desire sleep."

"Yes."

"Good. We sleep." And he pulls up the back flap of his loincloth to make a pad for his head, and simply lies back peacefully. I wriggle round in my sleep shelter and do the same.

"Good night, sleep well, Kamir."

"Sleep well, 'Om Jared." Then suddenly he adds a question I sense as deadly serious: "Will more like you come?"

I am glad to be able to reassure him. "No, unless you ask. Oh, maybe

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once a small party to record your world, if you do not object."

"Why should we?"

And so we both relax, the alien on his warm white sand, me on my galactic dinghy, and the little crabs and lizards and other creatures of the night come out and sing or fiddle or chirrup their immemorial chorus. I remember thinking as I drift off that they are a good warning system; only when all is still, do they sing.

WHEN I waken in full sunlight, all is calm and still. Too still; the sea is like glass. I check my barometer. Yes, it has started downward.

Kamir is nowhere in sight. I feel a sense of loss. What, has he abandoned interest in me to return to his watery world? I hope not.

And — good! — in a moment or two, there's a splash out on the reef. Kamir surfaces. He comes quickly back to shore, towing something. When I go to meet him, I see that it is a silky purse-net, full of flapping fish.

Too preoccupied to greet me, he hurries up the beach and kneels over his catch, his beautiful face tense. He begins quickly decapitating them, finishing the last one before cleaning any. Then he sits back, sighing relievedly.

"Their pain and confusion are hard to bear," he tells me. Then, smiling: "Morning greetings. 'Om Jared!"

"Greetings." I know what he means. I once made the error of going too near a meat-killing place; it had taken me a fortnight to recover.

"I wish we could eat some other way. We all do," Kamir tells me, working on the fish. "But plants are not enough."

I agree, looking over his net. An elegant little artifact, clearly hand-made. His is not a machine culture. "I think there is a storm coming."

"Oh yes." He touched his shining hair. "My head is full of it."

"When?"

"This evening for sure." He looks me over again, curiously. "What will you do in the storm, 'Om Jared?"

"Take my stuff farther up on land and wait it out. What will you do?"

"Well, of course, we go down into the deep water where all is calm and wait it out, as you say. Very boring. . . . But today I think I will stay with you. I haven't seen a storm on top since I was a child. Would you like me to be with you? I can help carry your things." His head cocks to the side

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as he looks up, shy, coy, absolutely charming. I can no longer stand this convention of "he."

"Kamir —"

"Yes?"

"Kamir, in my race there are two types of people, because of our way of reproduction —" I begin a clumsy exposition of gender and sex. What's the matter with me? I never have trouble with this part of Contact, never thought about it before.

I am halfway through, when Kamir bursts out laughing. "Yes . . . yes. . . . We also have two. And—?" Another of those killing smiles.

"And which are you?"

"Do you ask?"

"Yes."

"I thought it was plain. Perhaps because I am so ugly, it is not."

"Ugly? But you are very beautiful, Kamir."

The lovely face turns on me, the incredible deep-blue eyes wide. "Do you *mean* that, 'Om Jared?" A hand comes timidly to clasp my forearm.

"I mean it. *Yes.*"

Very softly, Kamir says, "I thought never to hear those words." Then, whispering: "I am an egg-bearer. What you call a female."

And her — her! — red head goes down on my forearm, hiding her face.

I can only stammer, "Ah, Kamir, I wish we were not of different races! —"

"I, too," she breathes.

It is incredible. Whether a chance match of pheromones across the light-years, whatever, I am trembling. I look down her graceful back, with its lacy frill proclaiming her alienness, and it does not seem alien at all. My mermaiden.

But I am in mortal danger. I must straighten up and fly right.

"Kamir, I do not think you should stay with me through the storm."

"Why not?"

"It — there might be dangers —" It is impossible to lie to a telepath.

"If you can endure them, so can I! — Ah, why do we speak nonsense? For some reason you are afraid of my nearness."

"Yes," I say miserably. What can I tell her convincingly? Of the iron Rule Number One in ET contacts? Of the follies that Humans, men and women alike, succumb to? Of the fact, which I have just realized, that I

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have been a very lonely man? Why else, I ask myself, should I be smitten by a purely chance resemblance to Human beauty?

"Look," she says, lifting her head to the sky. "The storm is coming much faster.... I don't think I will have time to swim to a really safe place. If my presence disturbs you, I will stay far, very far away. When we have moved your things."

Little mischief, is she lying? My senses tell me so. But when I, too, look up, I see that the sky has taken on a curious yellowish tint, though no clouds show yet. The sea is so flat it looks oily, and the air is ominously still and hot. She is right: whatever is coming, is moving fast. And these seas *are* shallow; it may be a long way to a deep place. In any event, it is time to secure my possessions.

"Very well," I say with profound wisdom. "Then if you want to help me, we will move my boat and the rest up into the dunes behind the beach."

She smiles radiantly, and we go to it.

But it is a slow process; she exclaims with interest and curiosity over all my things — wet suit, waterproof recorder, pump, repair kit, camera, lights, charging device, scuba gear, first-aid kit, my lighter — (I find she knows fire, which her people accomplish by twirling hardwood sticks), and all — down to the binoculars, which charm her, and the harpoons, which turn her very sober.

"You kill much."

"Only for food, like you. Or to save my life."

"But this is so big."

"Well, I might be attacked by something big, like the crab. You killed it, you know. Without claws, it will die of starvation."

"Oh no! It will eat algae. And the claws will grow again. We use them like that to pull building supplies." Image of a big crab with a harness hooked on its carapace, hauling a laden travois. "When they get dangerous, we chase them back to sea."

"Ah."

Some perverse honesty compels me to show her my waterproof laser, which I carry in my swim trunks.

"This is for use if I am attacked on land." I demonstrate on a nearby shell. She runs to examine the burn.

"It would do this to flesh?"

"Yes."

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"Why, when I came in your boat, you might have done this to me?"

Blue, blue eyes gaze at me, horrified.

"Not unless you attacked me so viciously that my life was in danger."

"Oh, but could you not *feel* the warmth?" She flutters her hand from herself to me and back. I think. Yes — from the first moment, I could. Damn it.

"Well! You are strange." Shaking her head, she resumes lugging a battery up the dune. She is very strong, I notice.

We have found a splendid hollow in the high dunes in which to ride out the storm. Somehow, nothing more is said about her staying far, far away.

Finally, we stake my big tarpaulin over the heap of belongings, and bring up the boat. I rope it upside down to three stout plant roots. The scrub "trees" growing here resemble giant beach gorse and have great holdfast roots.

By now the air is so humid and strange that our voices seem to reverberate on the still beach. And we can see a level line of white cloud rising up at us from the horizon, growing against the upper wind. Under it is a tinge of darkness, the first sight of the squall line. And in the far distance beyond, towers pale cumulus. It looks like a whole frontal system coming on us. Will the weather change?

"You may grow cold here, Kamir."

"Oh, I am used to that."

"You could put on my wet suit." [What, and leave me naked? I am mad.]

"No, when we cover our skins, we grow too thirsty."

Aha, I was right about the osmotic protection in the skin. Perfect adaptation.

"Well, if it turns cold, we can always make a fire. Let's gather some of these heavy stalks and stems."

When all is ready, we sit on the dunetop, swinging our legs and eating our respective provisions, watching the squall line rise until it divides the visible world. On our side, all is still and sunny and hot; we are caught in an eerie stasis. A kind of water animal I haven't seen before paddles about in the bay, followed by a line of small ones.

"Jurros," Kamir observes. "They are very tame. Only the big fish bother them."

I wonder about those "big fish." Are they sharklike? But in response to my query, Kamir only laughs.

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"Oh, you pop them on the nose. They run away."

Well, I have heard people say that about white sharks. I resolve to watch out for any "big fish."

The storm is closer and closer; but still, nothing stirs around us. Half the sky is shuttered with black roiling cloud, yet here it is impossibly bright and calm. The barometer must be falling through the deck; it is suddenly a little hard to breathe. I check it; yes, it's at the lowest point I've seen it. This is going to be ferocious.

We watch quietly, gripped by the drama of the scene. The water animal has now disappeared.

Just as it seems that nothing will ever happen, a shudder runs through the world. Still in total calm, the sea wrinkles itself like the skin of a great beast. A tiny puff of cool wind lifts our hair. And a few big drops of rain, or perhaps hailstones, plop into the surface of the water and onto the beach.

And then, with a rush and a bellow, the storm hits.

In a moment the flat water has reared itself into a thousand billows two meters high, running unbroken from shore to shore. The breeze becomes a blast of wind against us. In the last rays of sunlight, a million specks of diamonds flash from the waves into darkness. And then the sun is eclipsed by cloud; the world is twilight-dark.

Eerily, the papyrus plants all bend over with a whipping sound before we feel the wind that bent them. And then it hits, and the boat bangs up and down as if it will tear from the earth.

We scramble back from the dunetop and get under cover of the boat, holding it down over our heads. Then the sky opens, and tons of water dump on us, drumming intolerably on the boat. I am sure it is hail that will tear the boat, but when I stick out a hand, it is not. The world is in uproar around us.

Kamir is going excitedly, "Whoo! Whee!" — I can barely hear her over the storm, but I can see her eyes flashing blue fire and her little back fin standing straight up.

"This is not boring?" I yell.

"No!" Laughing, grinning with excitement.

"But —," I begin, and am drowned out by a *crack!* of lightning, and thunder like a gigantic bolt of tearing silk. Then the crack and flashes and roars and rumbles are all about us. The strikes seem to be hitting the beach and the dunes. I see Kamir's fin suddenly clamp itself into her back,

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and her laughter changes to a squeal. I realize she hasn't seen, or has forgotten, the lightning part of a storm. She hangs onto my arm, quaking as each bolt hits. And then, somehow, she is in my arm, her face pressed against my chest, while I hang onto the boat for dear life with the other arm.

"It won't hit us; the boat will stop it," I howl at her.

Water is coursing down the sides of the hollow we are in. Down below, the beach has disappeared under a wilderness of sinister yellow-gray breakers that are striking and tearing against the dunes, and throwing spray to mingle with the rain on us.

But by degrees the wind changes from a wild whirl to a steady blow, driving rain across us, and I am able to release my aching arm and rope the boat more securely.

That was, I think, my last chance to escape.

But I do not take it. That arm joins the other around the slender, quivering Kamir, and she clamps her whole body against me. For warmth.

Her back is cold. I rub it to warm her, cannot resist fingering the pretty little fin, which makes her giggle. I rub, stroke, but the coolness seems to be in her skin. It feels thick, a pale green velour over soft curves. I try to concentrate on its interest, its prevention of dehydration. Yes, I see there are tiny pores, but how they function is beyond me. I am stroking rhythmically now, unable to keep from enjoying the exquisite forms of her back and flanks.

And, oh! — Warmth comes, but not the warmth I wanted. Her shivers have turned into unmistakable, sinuous wiggles under my hand. She is whispering something, her free hand feeling for my swim trunks. And, gods! — her silken loincloth seems to have come undone. . . . Tom Jared, what are you doing? Stop now, you fool. This is no girl, but a grown alien — a god-lost *fish*!

There is no stopping. I have time only to glimpse what seems to be an organ on the front of her lower belly, a solid mounded track running up to her navel, like a newly healed scar. My body has taken me over, relieved me of the cold swim trunks, and is longing to press into her.

Only, where? Her crotch is as smooth as an armpit. I can only lay myself alongside the "scar" and squeeze our bodies together. "Yes," she says. "Oh yes!" There is a feeling of clasping.

From there on, I don't know exactly what happens. It isn't Human, but

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exciting beyond words, and finally, somehow, fulfilling. And at its height a tremendous lightning bolt hits the beach. . . .

. . . Much later I come back to consciousness. The rain is still drumming on our shelter, but the wind has abated somewhat, and the waves aren't quite so fierce. More water has drained into our hollows; we are lying in a puddle.

Kamir is asprawl, half under me and wholly wet. For a moment I fear I have hurt her. But she is only deeply asleep.

And I — I have broken Rule One, and the sky will fall on me. And I do not care.

"Kamir? Kamir?"

Answering smile, long, slow, and beautiful. Lazily, the big eyes open their sea-blue pools.

"Are you all right, my dear?"

"Um'm. . . ." Sleepy, obviously as fulfilled as I. Her lips move.

"What?"

"Never. . . ."

"Never what?"

"I thought — never would I know — Oh, you have been sent from the skies to rescue me."

Wild bells of warning — new ones — ring in my head. Does she assume I will stay here with her? Oh gods — I bitterly reproach my offending body, my weakness. But looking at her lying there, the mere thought of leaving gives me a pang. Can it be that I truly love this little alien? Oh gods — How wise are the Federation regs!

"Let me get you out of this water."

"Why? It's comfortable. . . ." As if daring greatly, she puts her hands up to my cheeks, the dainty wrist-frills quivering.

"Tell me, 'Om Jared: Do I still seem beautiful to you?"

"Yes . . . oh *yes!* But why do you ask? Don't you know you *are* beautiful?"

"But I am ugly; everybody knows that. My people say I am so ugly, it is good when I leave!"

"No!" I protest. "But to me, and to the eyes of all my people, you would be considered wonderfully lovely."

"Ahhh. . . ." She gives me an adoring look and a smile, and next moment is fast asleep again, like a child. My mermaid.

There seems nothing better to do. I follow suit.

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We wake in darkness. The wind has died, and the three little moons are rising, showing a sky of racing cloud fragments.

"Hungry!" exclaims Kamir, grinning.

"I, too."

And we rise from our puddle and go up to sit on the dunetop, now scoured almost flat by the gale. Below us the beach is emerging from the waves. It is chilly; a fire seems good, so I bring up the dry stuff we had collected and soon have a comfortable little blaze.

She is fascinated by my lighter. Soon she has satisfied herself that it used the principle of friction, too, like her people — but what is it *made* of? What is this stuff, "metal"? Rock, coral, and shell are the hardest substances she knows.

So the evening starts, unexpectedly, with a lecture on metallurgy. Oh, if only I could find deposits of something, iron, copper, silver, tin! I wrack my memory, can remember only something about manganese globules on the seafloor — or is it magnesium? There must be some metal available to these people, if only I could tell them what to look for. I dream of precipitating them into an Iron Age before — before I go. I wince.

As to my plastic gear, I can only describe to her a gross oversimplification of petrochemicals and polymers. She shakes her head worriedly.

"So much! You have so much. . . . But do you have music?"

I fish in my recorder pack and come up with a lovely piece by Borgnini.

"Listen. This reminds me of you." Which it does, especially the flute solos.

She cocks her head at the first notes. Then, seeing me lie back, she flops down with her head on my stomach to listen. I am diverted by the shining red silk of her pseudohair.

"Oh," she exclaims once or twice. "Ah!" I think she likes it.

When the piece has drawn to its ravishing finale, she turns to me with glowing eyes. "Oh, you have beautiful music! I never — we never heard such sounds. But no voices!"

"Not in this one. They are what we call musical instruments."

"We must make some," she says determindedly. "You will show us how. Now, more!" She leans back again.

"I haven't much in this little box. But here is another from my homeland." I give her Brahms's Quintet for Clarinet in E.

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And so the evening passes. . . . I am impossibly happy.

Before retiring, we drag the boat up to the top to sleep on, and spread out her loincloth to dry. It's more complex than it looks, with four small pockets. The fishnet goes in one. I concentrate on this to avoid looking at her body.

"You shall wear this now," she says shyly, patting the cloth.

"Me? Oh no."

"Yes. It is right."

"Why, what does the loincloth mean?"

"Well, first they mean that we are ripe. All my age group are wearing cloths now. When all are ready, they go out to sea, to explore and to meet each other. When" — I think she says — "when a couple forms, they exchange clothes and return so, to let everybody know they are together. Of course, I went out alone, this way where nobody will come, because I knew nobody would want me. I expected nothing. And I found you! Oh —"

In an exuberance of love, she pounces on me and, before I can protest, rolls me off the boat and around in the sand, nuzzling and kissing me. Strong little mermaid!

I catch her and roll her back, and we play like puppies.

When we are both gasping with laughter, naked and sandy, we fall into each other's arms and let nature have her will. Blissfully, there are no insects here. We fall asleep once more, enmeshed in love.

Only, just as I am drifting off, I catch her whisper.

" 'Om Jared?"

"Yes?"

"You will, won't you?"

"Will what?"

"Care for them. You will?"

"Them? What?" I force myself awake.

"Our babies."

Oh gods.

"Kamir," I say gently, "I hope this will not make you sad, but there won't be any babies. Our physical beings, our bodies are too different."

She frowns. "You don't think there will be babies?"

"No. I'm sorry."

"Well," she says, with a return of her old mischief, "I think differently!" And she lays one hand on her abdomen, smiling, and lies back.

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So do I, but not restfully. It has occurred to me that some Terran mammals, like rabbits, will give birth parthenogenetically if stimulated by saline water. What if, gods, what if she is right, and some monster is born?

" 'Om Jared?"

"Yes?"

"Even if there are no babies, as you say, you will at least stay until I die?"

Oh no — does she mean, spend my life with her? Gods, what have I done? "Oh my dear, do not talk of dying. Not now."

"Yes," she says musingly. "Maybe you are right. But I think of it."

And I can feel a dark shadow on her mind.

"But why think of it? Please don't, my dear."

"Why? Because it comes so soon. Do you not know? This is my last season in the world now."

"Oh Kamir — What's wrong? What's wrong?" I am bending over her, afraid of I know not what. "Tell me!"

"Why, because we love. Because I love with you. Is it not so with you?"

"Kamir, I don't know what you're saying. What is wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong. When you love, you die. The woman dies. The man lives, to feed the babies. Is it not so?"

"No! No! In my race the females live long, whether or not they love. Longer than the men, often. Do you mean you expect to die because we made love?"

"Why, yes. We all do. Only, I feared I would live forever, alone."

"Good gods.... But I am sure you won't have a baby, Kamir. We are too different. Like a — a crab and a fish; they can't have young together."

"And you are the crab?" She laughs playfully. "But no, perhaps you are right. We won't think of it. This is our happy time."

She snuggled down closer in the hammocky boat. "Sleep well, dear 'Om Jared. Sleep well."

"Sleep well, my darling."

I lie sleepless, incredulous.

What horrible wrong have I committed in my selfish lust? Even if I call it "love," it led me terribly astray.

The little beach life is tuning up its night song, but I am in no mood to appreciate it. A million unanswered questions are revolving in my head

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like rolls of barbed wire. What is this murderous process she believes will kill her? There must be a way to stop it. It can't be biological; the species wouldn't survive. Perhaps the people in the village make some lethal potion or charm they give women. I could stop her from taking it. Maybe they acquiesce in their deaths, by stopping eating, or something of that sort. I could stop that, too. There must be a way — I *must* stop it.

Eventually, fatigue takes me and I lose consciousness, to dream of a terrifying great crab taking Kamir.

THE MORNING is washed clean and clear; the barometer is high. Kamir gets up and announces she will go to the reef for fresh fish. I get out my scuba gear and prepare to go with her; I don't want us to be parted.

She is still nude, and as she stands, stretching luxuriously in the morning sun, I make myself inspect her.

She is a radiant figure, palest of green-whites in the golden sun, with that mop of fiery "hair." A faint flush suffuses her cheeks and lips and touches her body here and there. There is no other hairlike stuff on her; she is as smooth as a marble statue. Only, on her lower abdomen, there is this vertical thick welt I had glimpsed, like an old cicatrix. I see it is composed of two long lips, tightly appressed. Evidently, their opening discloses the softness I had found. Closed, it is only a keloidlike ridge.

I find I, too, am being inspected. After a moment she comes close and touches me. Involuntarily, I react, and she draws back, laughing and shaking her head.

"So different!" she says. Then, "Show me a picture of your women."

But I find I can barely summon up an adequate image of a Human female, so much has this little mermaid obsessed me. When I do, it seems, well, messy and strange.

"H'mmm," she says. "So all are ugly, like me!"

"What is this 'ugly'?" I am becoming exasperated. "What about you is supposed to be ugly?"

"Why, I am so thin and bony, all over." She puffs out her cheeks and, with her hands, sketches over herself the outlines of a very fat woman. "I should be like this! Then you live long enough to help. — Oh, but I see you don't want me to say that. Let's go to the sea."

So we run down the dunes and splash out until I have to stop to put on

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my gear. It all amuses her vastly. When I submerge, she circles me, swift as a fish, with her flared-out gills. I have trouble making her take my needs seriously; she tries to slip my mask off for a kiss, and I have to surface and explain that if she wishes to keep her lover, she must allow him to breathe. She sobers quickly, catching my serious feeling-tone, and after that we have no more trouble.

It is enchanting, down below, watching her herd little reef fish into her net. And I, too, sorrow when we come out and have to kill them.

I have an idea.

"Kamir, have you ever looked at yourself?"

"Yes. Mavrua keeps a polished shell. And sometimes, in very still water."

"Look." And I root out my little mirror. "Now you will see beauty."

She loves it, turning it to catch me, too. But she cannot resist trying to make a "fat" face.

I try to convince her, tracing my fingers over her delicate features. But she only hugs me.

"I may keep this? No one has seen anything like it."

"Certainly."

That reminds me. While she is tucking away the mirror, I try to ask her what her people call themselves. It's the same old situation: they are only "the people," or "us." Her particular settlement is "the Souls of Ema," after some legendary father, and an neighboring group is "the Souls of Aeyor," for a woman who made an extraordinary trip.

"But we must have a name for you. You don't want to let outsiders name you something like *'Homo wettensis*?" (Or, gods forbid, *"Homo pforzheimerana."*)

"Homo wettensis!" she mimics, giggling. "Why?"

So I have to explain about her world being called "Wet." That sends her off into paroxysms of laughter. But then she sobers. "Mnerrin."

"What?"

"An old word that means 'wet,' or 'the wet ones.' Would that not do?"

"Why, yes, if your people agree. *Mnerrin* is quite fine."

"Oh, they won't mind. Very well; your Mnerrin asks, What shall we do today?"

"Well, would you like to explore inland? Or shall we look for some islands you haven't visited? I thought we might go in my boat; it will take just two."

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She clasps her hands like a delighted child. "I'd love that! Yes, there are islands there" — she points north — "that haven't been seen for lifetimes."

"Let's go see!"

So we launch and repack the boat, and set off. She is much pleased with our speed, only, once or twice she puts her hands over her ears as if the motor's hum bothers her.

"How fast does it go?"

I show her — but she soon covers her ears and cries, "Slow, slower, please — I can't see anything!" I realize that she has been mostly peering down into the water, while my eyes are on the sea and sky.

"Look, there is a big fish."

I see a moving shadow of enormous size, perhaps three meters. And before I can protest, Kamir throws a last morsel of fish overboard. The shadow surfaces — a big tan shape with round eyes. As it spots the fish, the long-beaked bill breaks the water and clamps down. I get a glimpse of big, sharp, cartilaginous ridges inside.

"That thing could take your arm off!"

"Well, if you let it, maybe. But look!"

To my horror, she rolls overboard. I see a flurry and a swirl, and the thing hurriedly departs.

Kamir jumps and flips back in, laughing. "See? I just popped it on the nose; I told you."

"Don't ever do that again, my crazy little darling. It frightens me for you."

She rolls over and cuddles between my legs, still laughing. "Well, your driving this boat frightens me for you! . . . But there is our first island."

The new island turns out to be spectacular, an old volcanic cone with strange tunnels running into the sea, from former lava tubes. So Kamir must be shown my instant camera, and exclaims over the tininess of the images. She wants to sleep there, but I detect enough signs of possible activity to make me discourage this, and toward evening we push on.

The next island proves to be full of the birdlike creatures. I pick one up — they are prefectly tame — and fancy I can trace signs of its evolutionary course from fish, too.

Next day there are two islands covered with a multitude of flowers, and the day after that, one whose river and bay teem with bright-colored, harmless sea snakes. And some days later comes a highlight: some river

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fish are clambering out of water and up in the undergrowth in pursuit of butterflies. And the next day on oddly barren island; and the next day, and the next. . . .

I am guiltily aware that I should be making a record of all this. But when I get out my recorder and start, Kamir is so amused at my solemn tone of voice that we get little work done. My only concession to practicality is to keep a route map of our travel; so far it has been due north, so that my little base camp and the lander — about which I refuse to think —are still straight south.

We junket on and on over the turquoise sea, sometimes stopping to dive at barely submerged coral reefs that would tear the bottom off a larger boat. And when the spirit moves us, we make love, sometimes in a fit of passion, sometimes gentle as children.

It is the happiest time of my life.

Only, one day I notice that where Kamir's stomach had been elegantly flat, it now seems to have taken on a womanly curve. I put it down to the extraordinary number of little butterfish she eats, and forget it . . . or try to. The weather is halcyon-beautiful. A few times we see storms in the distance, but they do not come near.

One very clear night we are camped on a beach like the one on which we met, with a small estuary and its group of papyrus-cenya in the center. Kamir finishes the handsome wristband she has been making for me from the tail of her loincloth, using for needle a splinter sliced from a cenya stem. (Regretfully, she has had to admit that we couldn't comfortably exchange clothes.) *In lieu of my trunks, I give her my identity bracelet; it* won't do on her wrist because of the fin, but it goes nicely on her slim ankle.

When she sees the lettering, and I spell out my name, she frowns.

"I think this is something for Maoul," she says.

"Who is Maoul?"

"An old man, very wise. He made some of those land pictures you call 'maps.' These are something like that."

"Yes," I say, surprised. Bright little mermaid!

"And now" — she stretches out with her head on my lap, and hands me the binoculars — "you will tell me more, please, about those stars."

It is a topic we have just broached. I lament my star charts, left back in the lander; it is a perfect night for viewing. I do the best I can; she is very

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keen and remembers well. Later we drift off to sleep, entangled in the binocular strap, with images of dark nebulas floating in our heads. . . .

— And then I am suddenly awake. What's happening? All is still; too still — that's what waked me. All the night creatures are silent.

Something is on the beach.

I listen hard and catch a faint splashing. Correction, something is coming out of the sea, over by the river outlet, where papyrus-cenya hide the view. The moons are just rising. I sense Kamir is awake and listening, too.

Can it be a giant crab?

But as I form the thought, the last thing I expected in this world happens — a light shines out.

It's not a torch, but a bright greenish glow. Then it begins to blink, rhythmically. Signals?

"Ahhh," says Kamir. "Wait one moment, my love. I go."

"Kamir, wait —"

But she is up and racing down the beach, toward the cenyas.

I wait tensely, straining my ears. Aha — a faint colloquy; of course, I remember, I'll hear little; these people are telepaths. Anger rises; who or what dares to intrude on us? Who can it be? I realize I know so little about Kamir; could this be a father? A lover? A pang of raw jealousy grips me; the thought that it might be another woman never enters my besotted mind. And I've forgotten, or never believed, Kamir's story of being unmarriageable. Can this be a *husband*, hunting her?

And then, abruptly, without my hearing footsteps, they are beside me, two forms blocking out the moonrise. The stranger is taller and much stouter than Kamir.

" 'Om Jared? This is Agna, my egg-mate."

What is she telling me? I get the image of a large object, which crumbles or splits to reveal — no, not objects; babies. An image of a woman holding two of them.

"Your *brother*!"

"Yes, yes!"

Vast relief for me. I remember my manners.

"Greetings, Agna." But wait — has he come to charge me with violating his sister? Gods! . . . No, he returns my greeting cordially, adding, "For three days I track Kamir. Now I find her here with you."

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"Yes," says Kamir. "Agna, great happiness has come to me. 'Om Jared is my mate."

"No!" says Agna, looking at me in astonishment. "But Kamir is so — so —"

I get an image of the unsaid word and push it away. So Kamir was being truthful about her "ugliness."

"In my eyes," I say firmly, "and in the eyes of my people, if they could see her, Kamir is a very beautiful woman. Her appearance is so lovely that I was attracted to her at once. I only hope that I am not too ugly, as you call it, in your eyes."

"Never!" exclaims Kamir loyally, and adds with more realism, "He is so strange altogether that 'ugly' has no meaning. Oh Agna, couldn't you tell? You followed a trail of happiness."

"Yes," Agna nods. "I was puzzled. Well, little sister, the sun of the seas seems to have smiled on you. Just when we gave up hope that you would develop, a mate comes from the skies!" He chuckles. "But I have come to bring you home. And 'Om Jared, too, of course, if he will. The season of storms seems to have come unusually early this year. We should make the Long Swim now. And one has come from the Souls of Aeyor with very bad news."

"What news? What has happened? Aeyor is the campment near us," she reminds me.

"Later, later. You will have many questions, and I was not there when he came. Right now I need a bit of rest, and tomorrow early we will start."

"Oh, you are a tease, my solemn brother!" Kamir chides.

I am rather relieved that some Mnerrin are "solemn"; my little mermaid's unfailing merriment in the face of danger doesn't strike me as a survival trait. And I notice again what I had felt with Kamir, the sense of this person's profound civility. And he must be very tired; he apparently has been swimming for three days straight.

"You have eaten?" I inquire.

"Oh yes."

"Then let us go back to sleep, night traveler!" Kamir laughs, flopping down on our boat-bed.

"Right."

Agna's preparations are as simple as Kamir's were: he untucks the tail of his finely decorated loincloth, sits down, and spreads it on the sand to

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protect his face; and, saying, "Sleep well, little sister. Sleep well, 'Om Jared," he lies back, face to the skies.

"Sleep well, Agna," we say.

I close my eyes against the bright, tricolored moonlight, and hold her close in silence. So our halcyon time has abruptly come to an end. I sigh, sad beyond measure. And what is this Long Swim Agna spoke of? It must be the seasonal migration Kamir had told me of; apparently, the Mnerrin spend the stormy months at another island far to the south. I will, of course, go with them, somehow. Tomorrow I must calculate my batteries; perhaps I will have to return to the lander for recharge on the way. . . .

My last thought, as sleep takes me, is the inflexible value they seem to place on what they call personal beauty. It is almost tangible to them — yet Agna was willing to accept my relative viewpoint. Civilized! . . .

The nightly chorus is tuning up again; the three little moons ride high. What will the morrow bring? No — the day after; Agna estimated we were about two days' travel away in a straight line. . . . Out of the darkness comes a sleepy chuckle: Agna is laughing in his sleep. Kamir answers with an unconscious grunt, and I go to sleep.

The trip is dreamlike. Again I am struck by Mnerrin simplicity: next morning, after a quick breakfast and a pause to help me set a compass heading, Agna simply wades into the water and starts swimming. Through the pass he turns due east, while Kamir and I pack up my gear and launch the boat.

It takes us a surprisingly long time to catch up to him — those pale flashing arms really cover the distance, and he swims in a knife-straight line. Kamir has shown me how her red "hair" works as a direction finder in the sea. Still, it seems strange to find a lone swimmer heading so confidently with no land in sight. I wish I could take him aboard, but the dinghy holds only two.

We match our pace to his and settle down, sleepy in the balmy air. Kamir, too, is saddened by the end of our happy days. But presently she is restless.

" 'Om Jared?"

"What is it, darling?"

"If you would not be too alone, I want to swim for a time with Agna. I need exercise, and I'd like to see more in the sea."

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"I'll miss you, my darling. But if you want to, go."

So she tumbles overboard, and after that we go through regular exchanges, with Agna taking a rest now and then. As we follow Kamir, I think of how my little mermaid must have been before we met — a small person swimming alone in the wide seas. She had seen the fires of the lander's retro-rockets, she'd told me, and come to investigate. Fearless little mermaid!

Agna proves to be pleasant company, with an inquiring and thoughtful mind. Like his sister, he has red "hair" and blue eyes, though his crest is darker and his eyes lighter than hers. His features would have been handsome had they not been so larded with fat.

Following my theory of the ultimately utilitarian base for standards of beauty, I ask him if the plumpness they value so much has any purpose.

"Does it serve to warm you in cold water?"

"Oh, perhaps. But certainly it means long life."

"Long life. How do you mean?"

"For the female, after bearing young. And for the male, too. It helps with the feeding time. See me: I have just finished feeding five young, so I am thin. But I could not have fed my babies so well, had I been this thin at the start."

Complexities. I realize I have spent my time enjoying myself with Kamir instead of collecting data. Yet somehow I am unwilling to pursue the matter now, and am grateful when he says, reflectively:

"Yes, I see what you mean. We have never thought of it like that — interesting! And thus, you must have a different system, in which fat plays no part?"

"Yes, we do, although I'm not sure of the details of yours. But we regard fat as unhealthy. For us, *fat* seems to threaten short life."

His eyes sparkle with interest.

"So! How fascinating. Yes, a good theory! — But look, there is our dinner. Kamir!"

Without pausing, she shouts back over her shoulder, "I see it! Do you think I am asleep?"

"A reef, thick with *emalu*," Agna explains to me. "A pity we cannot bring some back for the people; it is delicious."

"We could pile it in the boat," I suggest, hoping that "*emalu*" is not, say, a stinging jellyfish.

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"No; it wouldn't keep," Agna says regretfully, and dives overboard.

Kamir, too, has submerged.

They come up with handfuls of a golden, anemonelike fuzz, which they devour like Human children into cotton candy. *Emalu* is, it seems, a fabulous treat. I get out my food bars.

And it is fabulous, dining there on the sea with a pair of merpeople. At the moment, no land at all is yet in sight. I somehow hadn't realized, when Agna spoke of two days' journey, that he meant two days and a night of simply swimming and sleeping on the open sea. Well, I'll be comfortable in the boat, and the weather seems settled. How will they do? I'm aware that there are a million questions I should be asking. But somehow it is difficult, conversing with two heads bobbing about on the ocean. . . . The truth is, I'm unwilling to break the spell.

Their dinner over, Agna starts off again, and they swim till darkness. Agna calls for a conference, and pulls out his light, which proves to be a small bundle of a lichenlike plant.

"Fish come to this," he explains to me. "I have to keep it in a dark pocket, or I'd get no sleep! Tell me, little sister, do you wish to continue? I could lead with this light. But we have made good distance; I can feel home strongly. And there is a reef just ahead where we could have a fresh breakfast."

"I feel it, too," says Kamir, who has been swimming with him. "I think we should stay here. I didn't get enough sleep last night, thanks to you." She laughs.

"Very well." Agna repockets his light and swims to a tactful distance. "Good night, little sister. Good night, 'Om Jared."

"Good night," we call, as Kamir climbs inboard to join me.

We stretch out in the little boat and let the wavelets rock us to love and sleep.

But toward morning, Kamir nudges me awake. It's bright moonlight.

"Dear 'Om Jared — I want to go in the sea now. To have a last sleep in the sea. Do you mind?"

"Yes, I mind. But go ahead, darling. Only, don't go too far away."

"I won't. Oh, my sweet darling, my mate-from-the-stars!" And with a hug and a kiss, she has gone into the deep water. I shudder with unknown fear. But she simply says good night again and turns over, gills open, to sleep in the sea. I see Agna's dark head floating, only a few yards away.

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Evidently there is no current here. I relax and try for sleep, but it does not come. The image of my little mermaid slipping away from me into darkness haunts my mind. I watch her until the moons go down and I can no longer see.

NEXT MORNING we awaken still together, and the Mnerrin dive for their morning meal. Studying the horizon, I see, straight ahead, the kind of long, low cloud that means land. But the Mnerrin are scarcely interested; their senses had long told them it was there.

We set off as before. It is again dreamlike, but hour by hour the cloud grows higher, closer, until my binoculars show the island beneath, where the dream must end. Or change. But what a wonderful way to travel, I reflect, watching the two pairs of arms flash rhythmically. Living, sleeping, eating *at home* in the sea. For all their Humanness, they are also aquatic animals. . . .

And I catch them mind-speaking each other as they go.

"See, Agna — new fish over there. Yellow, red, black tail. . . . Will you remember it? I have at least twenty new ones to report."

"Yes. . . . There must be a reef ahead," comes Agna's thought.

I am almost in a trance state, when suddenly the unmistakable sound of voices singing comes across the water. We are arriving. I turn to my glasses, and make out that we are coming to a large river estuary, surrounded by a low green swamp of delta, through which thread numerous streamlets. Behind the delta is the shore proper, a low bank running up to a plateau on which I glimpse land vegetation, trees. And beyond that in turn rises a central mountain, green to its summit. A large island.

As we come closer, I see that the swampy delta is full of small huts. And a column of smoke is rising from before a larger hut in the center. Most of the small ones appear in need of repairs, I see, as if no longer in use.

But most important, I see the people.

They are all on the beach, it seems, strolling or chatting in groups. One sizable group is lying down. And children are playing around them, seemingly all of one age. Babies, too, lie about, doing Human-baby things, or are held in arms. All eyes are focused upon us; even through the glasses, I can catch the gleams of blue. And I feel the feathery touch of mind-search.

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I decide Kamir should arrive in style, so I bring her in the boat and put her up front with a paddle. As soon as we get closer, I will hoist the motor and paddle her in.

The bay in front of the delta is quite narrow. Agna arrives at the reef and waves me to follow him through one of the many passes. Kamir is waving her paddle excitedly.

The mind-search and mind-greetings have become overwhelming. My mind-speech has much improved, so I send a formal greeting to the people, who respond in a babble. Evidently they have no formal spokesman.

"Whom shall I speak to, Kamir?"

"Oh, call to Maoul. That tall old man, there."

Agna is already wading ashore in Maoul's direction; we follow in. And from there on, the afternoon is a genteel pandemonium.

Maoul greets us cordially, having received Agna's news. But everyone on the beach must receive it, too, and share it with others, and everyone must meet me and congratulate Kamir — with varying degrees of incredulity — and Agna disappears to go to his mate, who is one of the invalids lying down.

Finally, he returns to direct us to his hut, and I make a fool of myself splashing through the swamp carrying my stuff, until someone points out that one walks in the little hard-bottomed rivulets, one of which, I now see, runs by every hut. By the time we get the boat and the gear up to Agna's terrain, after demonstrating everything to the crowd, dark is falling. And Maoul, it appears, has laid on a feast of celebration. They have caught a large fish to roast in cenya leaves, with various delectable fruits.

"Whee!" laughs Kamir, plumping down on the boat after our last load. "That was fierce! Oh 'Om Jared, how I wish we were back alone with our islands!"

For me, too, the afternoon has been a melee of pale, plump, genial gentlemen in loincloths; eager children; ethereal invalids opening huge blue eyes at my strangeness; and endless repetition by mind and speech.

"Me, too." I hug her. "But what is the bad news Maoul started to explain? I got carried off to be shown to the ladies. What's the matter with the women, by the way? They're so thin. Emaciated. Have you had an epidemic?"

"Oh no!" Kamir laughs. "It's just the birthings. — Well, Maoul said that one came, wounded from the Souls of Aeyor, the next encampment, to

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say that they had been set upon by terrible gold-skinned people, who tried to kill — yes, actually *murder* — all of them. Some have escaped by going in the sea — the gold-skinned ones do not swim, it seems — but the rest were killed. Isn't that terrible? What could such people be? How can it *happen*?"

I am shocked into sobriety. Oh gods, my paradise planet isn't all paradise; it contains others who are killers. *Homo ferox.* —Unless by chance this is an invasion of Black Worlders or other moral barbarians with high technology, out to conquer an attractive world?

But no, Kamir tells me. They are people of this world, only with strange tools to hurt and kill. And they have only the crudest mind-speech, and do not go in the water, as she'd said. The man who swam here — two days, with a bad spear cut in his side — said they had come from somewhere far, far to the west. "Where legends say we also come from," Kamir adds.

That would be the small continent Pforzheimer had seen, I figure. Perhaps it is still spawning out new races of *Homo wettensis*, as part of Old Terra once did. A dreadful parallel jumps to my mind; I push it aside resolutely.

"Kamir, I have seen such things on other worlds. I must talk with Maoul tonight. If this is what I think, you are in danger here. These goldskins will not stop with one encampment."

"Oh no. . . . Yes, you must speak with Maoul. And why don't you talk with Elia?"

"Who's Elia?"

"The man who swam here. He is lying in the big hut, ill with his wound. Maybe you can help him. . . . Oh 'Om Jared, I showed your beautiful bracelet" — she points to her ankle — "to Maoul. He said they were pictures of sounds, and we should learn them and make one for everybody. *And* make a picture of important things, too. I didn't understand it all, but he was very excited."

Fantastic. So I will end by having these people transcribe their speech into Galactic! I must see more of Maoul. Is he a lone genius, or is this the level of their intellects? . . . Meanwhile, it's a good idea to talk with this Elia.

I do talk to Elia, and am not made happy. These goldskins appear to be

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journeying from island to island, attacking everything they meet. They cross the sea by large, ugly war canoes. And they have lost their flock, or herd of some kind of land animal, so that they're hungry.

"How did you learn all this?" I ask Elia.

"I hid two days, watching and listening, until I was able to travel," he answers. "Man-from-the-skies, I thank you for your medicines. The people here have been very kind; they even made a song in my honor. But the relief from pain is better still!"

"And I think that will end the infection," I tell him, putting away the universal antibiotic the spacers give us.

The feast that night is held in front of the hut in which Elia lies, where I had seen the cookfire; it is the only bit of hard ground in the swampy delta. All is very informal — we simply sit about on tussocks of grass, and the children pass us succulent-looking morsels of fish beside which my food bars seem very bleak. The invalid women, at whom I will not look closely, are helped to small portions of a soup made by their mates from the fish drippings. And I get my first good look at Mnerrin teenagers, who, like the children, seem to be all nearly the same age. Aside from the overweight, they are charming, most with rufous crests, plus a few blonds and brunets, and all with the blue, blue eyes. As I sit there, the majority of the people are looking curiously at me between bites, and the impression made by those eyes is very striking. From dark to pale, from aquamarine to lapis lazuli to sapphire to crystal blue, all, all are as blue as if they carried a bit of the shining sea within their heads — as perhaps they do.

I think of a race whose eye color we will never know, and it motivates me to tackle Maoul. But first I must settle one question.

"Maoul, how does it happen that you are eating this large fish? Kamir gave me the idea that you do not kill, except the brainless little butterfish, and even then reluctantly?"

He becomes grave. "It was perhaps very wrong of us, 'Om Jared," he admits. "But this fellow here was also eating our butterfish. And he began tearing our nets. All over the reef. He harassed us until Pamir hit him too hard on the snout. We call him *omnar* — and legend has it that *omnars* are very good to eat. And so it's proving!" he laughs — that universal Mnerrin laugh that seems to express the purest of happiness.

"Well, that makes my task easier. For I must explain that you have encountered another *omnar* — a land *omnar*, who will not stop with your

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nets, but will kill and perhaps eat everything, including you."

"You mean . . . the goldskins?" he asks dubiously.

"Yes, I do. The point is this. You and your people are very different from the great majority of races. In my life of traveling and learning of travels, I have never encountered a race who so hated killing. You have not even the words for what is the daily occupation of many people — war, aggression, fighting, invasion, attack. Here, let me show you." And I send out horrible images, to him and the other men who were leaning to hear. I see their faces change.

"How unspeakable!" Maoul exclaims with loathing. The others join him. "Why do you show us such things?"

"Because you are in danger. I, too, hate what I have just shown, and so do most of my race. I thought I had come to the happiest world in the Galaxy when I found you. But now we must face the fact that you are not alone, that there is another people here, cruel and aggressive, who have found you. And they won't stop until they have attacked you and taken over your nesting site here."

"But there is plenty of room in the world. Why should they come here?"

"Yes. But people like that do not see it so. They want *all*. And maybe they want slaves — people to carry their burdens when they travel on land, or to paddle their canoes in the sea. Or they may want you who go in the sea to catch fish for them."

Maoul laughs. "If they make us go in the sea, we will leave."

"Not if they hold your children. Oh, they have terrible ways of forcing you to do their will."

"H'mmm. . . . You seem to know much about this." Maoul eyes me with a trace of dubiety.

"Yes, unfortunately. I told you, you are the only people I have met in a lifetime of traveling who are free of aggression."

Maoul ponders. "Well, it seems we must leave here and find another nesting place. But our women yet still alive are too weak to travel."

"Would you just give up your home to these intruders?"

"What else can we do?"

"You can fight. I can show you how. It means changing your way of life for a time, but that has been changed anyway. Wherever you flee to, these predatory goldskins will find you again."

"How can we — what did you call it — fight?"

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"What did they attack with? Spears — which are long, sharp staves —or perhaps arrows shot from a bow? Like this?" I mimic shooting.

He shakes his head. "The ah, spears, I think. And —" He lowers his eyes as if to shut out some vision too sickening to look at. "They came also with *fire*, Elia says." Maoul's voice drops to a whisper. "They burned huts — some with babies still in them."

"Oh gods. My friend, I am so sorry this evil thing has come to you. I believed I had found a world of peace, the most beautiful thing in the universe."

"What is *peace*?"

"What you have. How you live. No fighting. No killing. Harmony.... When I leave, I'm going to petition the Federation to save you, to exterminate these gold-skinned aggressors."

"Oh no. That would be evil. This is their world, too."

"But they are destroying this world.... Maoul, when these goldskins come, you people will be like helpless infants before them. And they will come before you depart — they might be on us tonight, and you don't even have watchers out. Will you let me train the men in some self-defense so they may at least protect their women and children? And will you let me organize a watch? We have a word for such a leader and trainer of armed men: a 'general.' Will you let me be your general for this purpose alone?"

Maoul's blue eyes bore into mine; I can feel his mind searching me. And tendrils of mind-search come from the other men. I open to them, show them all I am. They must be right about this, sure of their choice.

"Very well, 'Om Jared," Maoul says after a busy silence. "You have convinced me that we do face some trouble." The others nod. "We will call a council, and you will show them such images as you showed me, and be our general."

"Gladly," I say, wondering at the same time what I have let myself in for. To transform a profoundly pacific people into a defense force in a few days? Obviously, it can't be done. But anything would be better than their present helplessness. I must try.

Maoul is pointing to my wrist. "Now there is another matter," he smiles. "Kamir."

She had been beside us, listening intently.

"We see you have, against all hope, found a mate," Maoul continues. "Our congratulations." He puts an arm around her, kisses her cheek.

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She smiles radiantly — my little mermaid-bride.

"And you, 'Om Jared, strangely are the father; father-from-the-skies. But Agna says you know nothing of caring for young babies."

"I did not think there could be young. We are so different —"

Maoul is laughing wholeheartedly. He places both hands along Kamir's belly so I can see. And I can no longer delude myself — it is the belly of a pregnant woman.

"Oh gods! Have I done something evil?"

"I helped you," says Kamir smugly.

"No," says Maoul, suddenly grave. "How can babies be evil? They are the consummation we all long for. But how will you care for them? What will you *do*? I fear Kamir will not be much help."

Agna speaks up from where he had been sitting beside an invalid woman. "I have been thinking of this, Maoul. They can, of course, have my hut and birthing place — I will replace its roof tomorrow. And I will help him feed them until we start on the Long Swim. Then maybe Donnia here— "He turns to a plump young Mnerrin who has been standing by us, his attention divided between Agna and me. "Donnia is also our egg-fellow," he tells me, meaning, brother to himself and Kamir.

"Yes," says Donnia. "Brother and sister, I will help. My mate" — he bows his head briefly — "has already gone. And you can see that I am far from drained."

"His babies did not live," Kamir whispers to me.

"Your sorrow is my sorrow," I say formally. "I — we thank you deeply for your help. As I said, I had not believed that two such different people could have young. And I don't know what may come; the results may be bad. But surely, we need your help."

"Good, then it is settled," says Maoul. "Tell us, 'Om Jared, why did you come to our world?"

"To rest," I tell them. "I was very tired after a long task, and your world looked so beautiful."

"And now you have another task," the old man smiled.

"Two tasks," I remind him. "Tomorrow I start teaching you how to defend yourselves against these goldskins. For tonight I will just say this: Remember, the eruption of these people is going to change all your lives, for a time at least. And you are going to have to prepare yourselves to hurt, to harm, to kill, other beings who seek to kill you. Think on that."

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You are going to have to prepare yourselves to harm other beings who seek to kill you.

Looking and searching about, I see that my speech has evoked mainly puzzlement. Gods, what have I undertaken? I must plan. . . .

At Maoul's council next day, I see that the children and many of the teenagers are absent. Maoul says that he thought such plans were not for children.

"To the contrary, it is important that they learn. They will have parts to play, and this problem may be with them all their lives." So they are brought, down to the smallest, who stare at me with huge blue eyes, so much like plump little Human kids, despite their straight-up small fins.

I start by repeating what I had told Maoul, and showing them images of war and of the goldskins' probable attack. They respond, as I'd expected, with horror and the suggestion that they at once go someplace else. I try to convince them that mere flight is useless, that the goldskins will pursue them, and that they may well attack before the Mnerrin are prepared to move.

"You would be simply laying this upon your children, and upon your children's children, if you fail to solve it now."

The mention of children turns their minds. These people are amazingly tied to their young — all of them, even the young boys, place great value upon babies, I find. Perhaps because, I have noticed, they have relatively few compared with the other hominid races I know. I make a mental note to find out if the goldskin people are faster breeders.

I then outline my plan.

"When the goldskins attack us here, they will have learned from their last attack that you will seek to escape to the sea. So they will make sure to seize the beaches quickly, maybe even sending a separate party around the shore. If you attempt to flee that way, they will catch you easily. But tell me, that river" — I point to a line of papyrus plants marking the main stream to the estuary — "does it have a deep channel in the center all the way to the sea? Yes? Good. Then instead of going to the beach, you will make for the river. The problem is to defend yourselves and the women and children until you can all get there. One way is for the men to form a

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circle, with shields and spears on the outside, in which the children and weak ones can shelter. The goldskins will think you are making a final stand, and indeed, you can hold them off until all are assembled. But then you head for the river here, all in a group. That way you will fare much better than if you break and run individually; those who try that would be easily run down and killed." I show them an image.

The idea appeals to them, perhaps because of its symmetry.

"But the circle is no good unless we have shields and spears, and also warning of the goldskins' approach. So the first thing we must do is make weapons, and set out a guard. The seasoned wood in these unused huts will do for spears. Every man shall make his own — I will show you how —and his shield. I have a spearproof cloth, my tarpaulin, which we can cut up for shield-covers. For the watch, I need volunteers among the boys with the best mind-hearing, four for the shore and four for the beach. And an older boy who will supervise them."

So I proceed to organize a watch, and a weapons sergeant. When I ask for something that would make a tremendous noise, they produce conch-shells for the watchers to blow. And then I ask for a volunteer or two to go down the coast and keep watch on the goldskins' encampment at the lost village of the Souls of Aeyor.

A man named Falca speaks up. "It is my misfortune that I cannot mind-speak well. But I hear well. So I will go and watch and listen. And maybe my young friend Kimra, who swims so fast, will come with me to bring word back if need be?"

Kimra, a relatively slender lad, jumps up with shining eyes. "Oh yes, Falca! Let us start now!"

I see that my message has been far more keenly received by the younger Mnerrin. So their pacifism is not some innate predisposition, but a matter of culture, of training. What carefully wrought beauty I am destroying!

But I push the thought aside, and proceed to set out our first watch shift, telling their sergeant to be sure to check on them at random, unpredictable times. And then I tear out suitable wood from a storm-wrecked hut, and give a demonstration of spear making. Strong knives are the bottleneck; their shell knives are too frail. I ransack my gear for extra knives, and end up using my laser to prepare a supply of rough staves. As the first spears shape up in the hands of my future "warriors," I find

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another problem — I must dissuade them from weakening the spears by making handsome slim places for handholds, and wasting time on ornament and polish.

"I see that being a general is complicated," Maoul observes with a smile.

"Oh, it's an old, sad story.... But I have never met a people who were so far from war. I greatly fear for you."

That night about third moon, I waken in Kamir's embrace and go as stealthily as I can to surprise our lookouts. I find, as I expected, two of them fast asleep. I rouse them roughly and give them the lecture on the sacredness of guard duty. The younger boy is nearly crying, but I ignore it — with difficulty. His eyes are so much like Kamir's. During the early morning I get the sergeant of the watch to repeat the same trick on the next shift.

Next day I vary the menu by arranging a drill. I get all the boys and girls to impersonate goldskins, and have them come down the coast onto the lookouts, who respond enthusiastically with horrific conch blasts. The men come out of their huts and uncertainly form a loose circle near the riverside, into which the women, carrying babies, feebly come, and the smaller children. I see that some of my least-promising "warriors" will have to be spared to help the women take shelter, and sort them out.

My remaining corps of potential fighters, while overweight, looks more promising. Like many fat men, they are light on their feet and supple, and like all Mnerrin, very strong. I explain how we will use the shields, held alternately high and low, and briefly impersonate a goldskin — whom I have as yet never seen — in coming at them. They tremble and make way, and I harangue them like a drill sergeant on the need to hold their places and protect the children behind. After I have harassed them into tightening to a respectable defense, we practice moving all together to the river and forming a corridor to protect the women and children going in the water. The idea of *protection* is, I find, the best spur.

Then we turn to shield making; a wicker frame covered with a piece of my best tarp held on with spacer's glue makes a pretty spearproof defense, even if — which I can't find out — the goldskins have metal spearpoints. Against mere fire-hardened wood, it is impressive, and gives my warriors confidence. They are not cowardly, but merely totally unused to the

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idea of war itself, of hurting and being hurt.

This becomes clear when we go on to practice actual combat. I sacrifice one of my two canvas ditty bags, stuff it with sand and moss, and hang it up to give them a target to thrust at. It is very hard to get them to even pierce the "skin." When I tell them to hit me, to make me fall down, their blows are mere taps. In desperation, I pretend to fall; my assailant looks horrified, though I jump up and congratulate him.

But then comes assistance of a dreadful kind.

Young Kimra, who had been spying on the goldskins with Falca, comes swimming in one afternoon, broadcasting for attention. We gather round him as he wades ashore.

"The goldmen are definitely preparing for something," he tells us. "They have been holding conferences. Falca told me to tell you that. And —" He pauses. "We have seen several of the men they took prisoner. The golds have cut off their crests. Shaved them bald." He sends us the images.

"Now they can never escape," Maoul groans. But that did not seem to be all; Kimra is looking at the ground and biting his lip.

"What more?" I ask.

"And — I cannot say it. The children. . . ."

"Yes, what about the children? What have they done to them?"

"They — they are *eating* them!"

"Oh no!"

"Yes." The boy's lips tremble. "Yes. . . . One night we swam in close —and saw. A child's body was hung up by their fire, hung up like, like *meat*!"

Maoul looks at me. "Is this possible?"

"I fear it is. You see, they do not regard you as people. And they lost their flock of some kind of animals."

"This must be stopped!"

Around us I can hear the report being whispered from man to man.

"We must go there!" Maoul declares.

"No," I tell him. "You could not equal them in fighting. You would only be killed. And then they would come here for your children."

"Can you stop it 'Om Jared?"

I have been thinking hard. "I can try. Tell me, is there an island nearby that is on the route of your Long Swim?"

"Yes. The Island of the Green Coral. It is small, but with good food."

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"Then here is what we can do: There is one time when their camp will be little defended. That is when they start to come here. Find me a good swimmer, a boy too light to fight well. I will take him in my boat at top speed down to their camp. When the men leave to come here, I will go ashore with my fire weapon and free the children, and any other captives they have, including the mutilated men. Your boy can lead them all to the Island of Green Coral to wait for you. I will return here at speed and be with you when they attack."

"Can that be done? Let us question Elia closely on the distance by water and land."

"Spoken like a general."

As we go up to Elia's hut, I see a man attacking the canvas dummy with his spear. He runs it right through. The horrible news has wrought a change.

Elia tells us that the plan is feasible. To get here by land, the goldskins must go around a range of foothills; it might take them as much as two days.

As we come away, the sergeant of the watch comes to tell us that his boys have sensed minds nearby in the dawn. But the trace faded soon.

"That will be their spies," I tell Maoul. "They will go back and report on this village, how many we are, and the lay of the land. Thank fate they didn't see our weapons; they will think we are just like the village they crushed."

So I must wait at least two days before trying my rescue raid. Young Kimra goes back to watch with Falca.

We spend the days improving our drill, and solving last-minute problems. Such as, What if the goldskins attack the circle with fire? Torches? I set out big containers of water, with a delegate to keep them filled. But the prospect of torches is too daunting. In desperation, I give the fire-control sergeant my can of extinguisher and explain its use. But in the future they will have to depend on water alone.

And I confer with Mavru, their quasi-official Healer, to set up the way to treat spear wounds — packing them with the water-moss, which seems, like a similar Terra sphagnum, able to suppress infection. We set up a first-aid station by the river.

Strangely enough, in those last hours of peace, I get to know the Mnerrin better than ever before. I stroll the beach, watching their recreations.

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Among the more expected sights — boys and girls playing ball — I find a man surrounded by onlookers. He is drawing circles and triangles in the sand and, with a knotted string, explaining what he calls "Relations." This seems to be their art of geometry and mathematics. I am startled to find diagrams that imply knowledge of the Pythagorean theorem. So these people are not just simple Polynesian-like paradise dwellers! No, this beach is more like the Athenian agora, where men in simple lengths of cloth discussed the eternal verities.

"We plan to make a permanent structure of stone at storm-season home," one man told me. "And we are going to use Relations to make it beautiful."

I find that one of their carefully preserved possessions is a big shell straight-edge, marked off in equidistant intervals. They have a standard of measure! The man who carries it across his back has found a friend who has promised to take it over in case he is wounded in the coming fighting with the goldskins.

Nor has Maoul forgotten his discovery of the Galactic alphabet on Kamir's bracelet. he had been talking it over with others. They get me to teach them the whole alphabet, and begin discussing whether more letters are needed to "picture" Mnerrin phonemes. The agora, indeed!

For my part, I take time to teach the Relations enthusiasts about our system of written numbers. Typically, they grasp it at once, and start transcribing them onto their shell measure. They are especially interested in the concept of zero.

"With this, we can do many things!" exclaims Kerana, the Relations explainer. I wonder by how many centuries — or decades — I have speeded their mental evolution. I wonder about their minds; this is no case of an isolated genius, but of a group with high, though unexploited, mental capability. And they seem not to be in danger of the fallacy that brought Plato's and Aristotle's deductive logic low, the fallacy of refusing experiment. No; they test out every step of their Relational logic.

I tell them the story of Aristotle's deduction that women must have fewer teeth than men, while refusing to count his wife's teeth. They laugh. I sigh, and wonder if I should expose them to Bacon's scientific method. I try.

But time is growing short. I have scoured the land that lies behind the beach, and on the last day, discover a flint-like rock. I bring it to two

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men who have been doing shell knives.

"Look. I think you can chip this into blades that will be stronger than shell. Let me show you." Inexpertly, I flake out an edge. They assent with pleasure to trying.

Maoul has produced a youth named Manya to accompany me on the rescue party. On the last night I pack a few rations and emergency supplies into the boat, and we leave it secured to the beach, to start at dawn.

That last night with Kamir, she is untypically thoughtful. I think that the reality of all this has just come through to her, preoccupied as she is with her monstrously growing pregnancy. She has been lying lazily on the beach by day, sunning her vast belly, and smiling to herself, only distantly interested in my warlike activities. She is still enchantingly beautiful in a different way; my little mermaid has turned into a nature-goddess.

"Darling, take this." I extract from my gear my last resort, a tiny close-action personal laser. "Defend yourself with it if I do not return in time. But remember, sweetheart, you must wait until your attacker is very close, almost within arm's length."

"I will kill for our babies," she says calmly. "And you are right to go to save those children. We Mnerrin, as you call us, do not have many. All are precious." She hugs me again, then pushes me away.

It is very hard to leave her.

But Manya and I get into the dinghy, and shortly the little craft is leaping through the green waters at its great top speed. In a couple of hours, we are within sight of the other settlement's bay, a journey that has cost the wounded Elia two painful days. The birthing huts here are different, somewhat larger, and supported by a center pole. Falca and Kimra are still on the reef, invisible until we catch their mind-call.

We stop out of sight, where we will wait for the goldskins to leave, and hold conference.

Falca says he expects them to leave very soon. "And see, they are loading three canoes. I think it is as you said: they are sending a party by sea to cut off escape on the beaches."

"How many are there in all?"

"About ninety, counting thirty-six in the canoes."

"It is bad odds for our people. But I have a very powerful weapon that will kill many. I shall be busy!"

"Kimra told you about the children?"

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"Yes. That is why I'm here." I tell him my plan. Falca sighs.

"That is a great relief. Last night . . . they killed another . It was all we could do not to rush ashore and assail them. Stranger, you are a good man. Kimra and I were going to try alone, but we had no place to send them. The mutilated men cannot guide."

"Manya here will take care of that. Meanwhile, you and Kimra are no longer needed here. You might as well start swimming home. But be wary that those canoes do not overtake you in the water."

"Good. I go. The children are in that large hut with two entrances, and so are the other captives. They are tied with ropes."

"I can take care of that." I show him my shark knife. "Fair travel, friend." He nods, and without more ado, he and Kimra take off in long, flat dives.

And then we wait. It becomes clear that the goldskins' start will not be made till next morning; they are preparing for a feast. I make the mistake of giving my binoculars to Manya, and he sees the fresh-killed body of a child hung up by the fire. He chokes with fury, then weeps quietly. I take the glasses and try to soothe him as best I can.

"Oh, if only I had those long-range weapons you told us about! No — I would go to them; I will kill them with my bare hands. I would *kill!* I would kill! . . . We will return in time, won't we?"

"Yes, but you won't be with me, Manya. You will be leading the children and the mutilated men to safety on that island."

He heaves a sigh. "Yes, I forgot. But if there is a goldskin left ashore, I will kill him with my bare hands."

"Don't be rash, Manya. Those men are practiced fighters. One of them could destroy you. I will attend to the killing."

"Then I will kill their children!"

He seems to hear himself then, and looks shocked. But he continues in a grim voice, "Their children will grow into such as they. They have devoured our babies. Yes, I will kill them."

I, too, am shocked. What have I created? Or, no, it was not I, but the circumstances, the irruption of the goldskins. The sight of one's children being butchered like animals is not to be reacted to in a civilized way. He is not to be blamed.

But what about me? I contemplate cold-blooded genocide. No, not cold-blooded; these Mnerrin are in a sense my children. My ideal of Human life. . . . Grimly, I realize that I have fallen into every psychic trap that

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spacers are warned of. I love these people.

So be it. When I return, I will pull every lever, press every button known to me, to obtain official intervention, to save this planet for the Mnerrin. It's just possible, especially if one or two of my friends are still in their offices. . . .

Twilight has come. We eat and settle for the night, thinking our different thoughts. This is, in fact, one of the few times I have had pause from my duties to reflect. Manya's slight form beside me in the boat reminds me of Kamir. What of her? What of my babies, if, incredibly, they are born whole and viable? Can I stay here with them? Could I endure this tranquil life, as a non-sea animal? I don't know. . . .

In any event, the need to get off-planet and do something for the Mnerrin will dominate my life for a while. After that, we'll see.

The fact is that my conviction that our mating would be infertile has been so strong that I still do not believe I am about to father little half-aliens, if all goes well. I have never fathered others. What is that recurrent question, How will you feed them? How *are* they fed, without mother's milk, by nonmammals? I had vaguely supposed that they would eat fish, like the adults. Evidently, there is something that I, helped by Agna and Donnia, am going to have to do. And Kamir — I shudder away from the mounting evidence that somehow this birthing will mean her death. Surely those were older women, there in the village. Not my bright, vital little mermaiden! No . . . no. . . .These concerns are for after the coming battle. . . .

Finally, I sleep, and the balmy night goes by.

We rouse to dawn light, at once aware that the camp is in motion. I check the glasses. Yes, goldskins are loading the canoes, preparing to cast off. We had better conceal ourselves.

We paddle in among some rocks that have tumbled to the sea, forming one arm of the bay shore. There we eat and watch.

This settlement is similar to the one I know, in that it is in a delta around an estuary. Evidently, these marshy places are proper sites for birthing and rearing the newborn. And there must be a limited number of them. By driving the Mnerrin from them, the goldskins could make it impossible for the Mnerrin to breed. Idly, I wonder why the deltas are so favorable. Perhaps tiny babies are taught to swim in the little streamlets, before their gills are strong enough for the open sea? And I am still not clear as to what role fresh water versus salt plays in their lives. Really, it

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is shameful how I have simply *lived*, without collecting any respectable body of data!

At this moment, Manya nudges me, and we hear the *chunk — chunk* sound of paddles. A long, low, dark canoe, gaudily bedizened, comes into sight. Six paddlers to a side. We crouch low.

It passes by, about fifty meters away, followed by another, and another. And then no more. Cautiously, we nose out of the rocks to where we can see the camp.

It is so still that we can hear voices. After we have waited about two hours, we hear a different sound; a kind of chanting. It takes on a marching tempo. And then we see a band of about fifty men tramping up out of the swampland, chanting and blowing on pipes. They gain solid ground and set off down the coast. My heart has sunk — fifty and thirty-six, more than two to one against the Mnerrin. My laser will have to do good work.

But now we have other work in hand.

We still avoid starting the motor, but paddle in to their beach. We beach the dinghy and start at a crouching run toward the big hut Falca had pointed out. Women must be all about us in the camp, but we see none —until suddenly we come on a party of them right outside the hut. They have knives in their hands.

I notice only that they are brightly gilt, their hides like goldfish, and could be called handsome if your taste runs to eighty-kilo bodies.

Manya behind me is making an extraordinary noise through his clenched teeth.

I make a sweeping pass with the laser, and they go down like tenpins without making a sound, their throats burned through. Behind them the door to the hut is ajar. Had they been going in to murder another child?

Mind-cries are coming from the hut. I send strongly, "Friends come!", and Manya joins me. We step over the golden corpses and go in to a pitiful sight.

The hut is full of rails and posts, and everywhere are tied children, ranging from toddlers to teenagers. Some grown men, shaved bald, are tied up at one end. The hut stinks.

"Cut them loose, quickly." I have brought a spare knife for Manya.

"Hungry, hungry," comes the mind-cry, especially from the smaller ones, as we free them.

"You will have food soon," we send. But how? I shudder to think what

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meat we will find beside the cookfires. Still, surely they have already fed on it. And would their dead friends object to giving their flesh to save the living?

A spear clatters in at the other door; a woman dives back.

"You finish freeing them; I'll attend to the village," I tell Manya. "Can you guard the outer door?" I ask a bald man who is rubbing his limbs.

"Yes."

I go out and start through the village like a dervish, burning everything that moves. From one hut I am greeted by a spear. Inside, a man obviously sick or wounded is clinging to the center post. Beyond him crouch two women and children. Mercy is not in me that day; when I leave the hut, nothing lives behind me.

At intervals I check back to the big hut, where Manya is leading the children out. They start at the goldskin corpses. The mutilated men look nervously about. Their heads are covered with pink fuzz.

I have found a pot of meat stew simmering at a hearth, and basket-bowls. I put it before the kids without looking too closely.

"Can you catch reef fish, after what they have done to you?" I ask the men.

As luck would have it, a pile of their filmy nets, loincloths, and other belongings has been thrown beside another hut.

"Good. Now, when you have eaten enough, you and the children will follow Manya here to an island — I think you know it — beside the path of the Long Swim. The people from my settlement will pick you up as they go by."

"They haven't left yet?"

"No." And then I have to respond to the overwhelming mind-question coming at me from everyone, even as they begin to gulp food: "Who are you?"

"A friend-from-the-skies. Tom Jared. I have been living with your people since I met a girl named Kamir and mated with her. Now these goldskins are going to attack our village. I must return quickly and help them fight. I can carry only one. Is there a man here who can strike and kill? Kill goldskins? Our people need defenders." I send an image of a goldskin leaping at a Mnerrin.

To my surprise, amid the blank looks I had expected from most of the men, a younger one steps smartly forward. "I think I can do what you call

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fight, O-friend-from-the-skies. I have thought much during our captivity. Now I can kill. But I need things to strike with. Here!"

He bends down to the row of corpses and takes a strong-looking knife from a dead woman's hand.

"And now a long one —"

"We call those spears. Maybe we will find some in this big hut."

And indeed, we find a cache of spears. But they are mostly slim, decorated things for rituals and dancing. Again to my surprise, my new recruit sorts out some that are sturdy and useful. This lad is an untypical mutation, in theory, maybe, a dangerous one. Right now I wish I had a hundred of him.

"Good. Now we go. I have fish in the boat; you can eat on the way. And you others had best be on your way with Manya, lest some goldskins catch you again."

I bid good-bye to them as they eagerly follow Manya to the water's edge. The men have found some rope, and start tying the smaller children on towlines to their belts. Always this care for the young! I cut short their curiosity about my boat.

"Later. No time now."

The warlike lad's name is Sintana. His eyes shine as I direct him to help me tow the dinghy to deep water and hop in. When I start the motor and start skimming along the reef, he is visibly ecstatic.

"Now, I don't know whether we will overtake the canoes before they reach my village or not. So we must proceed with care whenever we cannot see a long way ahead. I want you to watch and listen with all your power for those canoes. I will have much watching to do to avoid hitting coral heads this close to shore. If you see or suspect a canoe, raise your arm like this and be ready for a quick stop, right? If you are *sure* that all is clear ahead, go like this."

Enthusiastic assent from Sintana. I gun up the motor to full speed, and we rip along at top speed toward my village. I want to keep close to the reef to avoid being sighted by the canoes ahead, but the danger from isolated coral rocks strings my nerves tight. Luckily, there is enough wave action to show where most of them lie. Avoiding one at the last minute, I nearly spill us. Sintana looks round questioningly, and after that I see him hang on.

He is radiating pleasurable excitement like a child, but, looking him

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over, I see he has plenty of muscle to go with his combative spirit. A gods-sent ally.

It's getting dark. Each time as we round a shallow point, Sintana waves me on. Those canoes have really covered ground. I'm not afraid of their hearing my motor over their paddling splash — and even if they did, they would not know what it was. But where are they?

We approach the last point before our bay. Suddenly, Sintana's hand goes up, and we jolt to a stop.

"I think I hear minds from around the point. Maybe quite close."

"They could be holed up, waiting for the men on land to arrive. No more talking now."

At lowest speed, we nose around the point. Presently we can see most of the bay, but no canoes.

"They're hiding right on the other side of these rocks," Sintana whispers. I listen, and fancy I can catch a crude mind-murmur.

"Can you paddle quietly?"

"I think so."

"Fine. Let's try to get a look."

We paddle the dinghy silently forward, about an arm's length from the rocks. Sintana's hand shoots up, and I stop. Eyes glowing with excitement, he whispers, "I can see the bows of two canoes, in a cove in the rocks. I don't know where the third is."

"Sintana, get down low in the boat. I am going around fast and fire my weapon at them. But we will be within spear throw. Make sure they do not hit you. And *do not throw your spear*; you will need it later," I add, knowing what the excitement could do to such a boy.

"And your part is to keep watch for that third canoe. Got it?"

"Yes." He is reluctantly crouching down.

"Get farther down. The air will be full of spears, and I must fire over you. Can you *stay* down?"

"Yes."

"All right. Hang on; here we go!"

I slam the lever to high, and we round the point in a great rooster tail of spray. In the cove behind the point are two canoes full of goldskins — good ; I had feared some might have gone ashore. I fire as soon as I'm in range, zigzagging as I come at them. Screams, barely audible over the motor and spray. I roar in as close as I dare, and then twist the dinghy into

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a hair-raising U-turn, firing all the time. Spray splashes over the canoes, but I see goldmen struggling up, lifting their spears. I turn again and make another pass, managing to laser every standing man.

But Sintana is in my way.

"Get down!"

"The third canoe! Look out! Look out!" he yells.

I glance back and see the third canoe, come out of nowhere, rushing straight at me. I turn and fire. Luckily, from dead ahead, the spearmen are blocking each other. But they are also shielding each other from my fire. I whip around fast and slice in close to the gunwale, doing slaughter — and then I'm out of the little cove, heading for the reef. Luckily, moons are up.

But that's as far as we go. The feel of the dinghy warns me — see two spear shafts sticking from the pontoons. Oh gods. I turn toward the beach, weaving between the rocks at the start of the reef, and just make shallow water as our craft collapses around us. No one is in pursuit.

Sintana and I jump out. I wrestle the motor from the sagging folds and hand it to him while I rescue the batteries. Thus laden, we struggle ashore, towing the half-submerged dinghy. Sintana, I'm glad to see, still has his spear. A cool boy.

At that moment a fearful hooting hits our ears from the delta beyond. The watchers have sighted goldskins and are blowing their conchs.

I hate to leave my wrecked dinghy to the attentions of any survivors from the canoes — it is my only link to the lander — but there's no time to do more than throw a couple of armfuls of brush over it. We start for the village at a run.

As we near it, I see splashing in the shallows. A Mnerrin family has forgotten the drill, and is heading straight for the sea. Ahead of me, two goldskins, shining in the moonlight, race after them, spears lifted. They throw before I can get the range; the man of the fleeing group goes down, into the water. The children stop, trying to pull him up, but the goldmen are upon them. I manage to pick one off, but the other is too close to the children.

He whips out something silvery — it's a rope; he is tying them up. He starts out of the surf, dragging them behind him, screaming.

We pound after him, Sintana in the lead. I see his spear flash, and the goldman goes down. By the gods, my Mnerrin has killed! We cut the children loose and tell them to follow us.

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"No, Father Pavo is out there!"

"He'll be all right. Come." I know that if Pavo has survived the spear, he will be safer underwater than onshore.

We run on.

Most of the goldskins are still coming down the bank onto the delta. I can see the main hut now, see that my Mnerrin have actually formed a protective circle. Women and children are still being thrust in.

I identify us by mind-call.

"Quick, there is time to start for the river *now!*"

"But Pavo's family are not here."

"He ran to the sea and got caught. I have his children. Here," I tell them, "get in behind these men."

The leading goldskins are upon us. I fire, pick them off. Others are circling, trying to get between us and the sea.

"They are after the children! Quick, to the river! All together, go!"

The circle starts off at a wobbly trot, the men in the rear having a hard time to shepherd the children and fend off the goldskins, who are now arriving in force. I fire, fire till no more are in range, wishing that I were within the circle firing out — too many times I have had to hold fire to avoid hitting Mnerrin. And then another shining rank of goldmen are upon us.

The next hour is collapsed in my mind into a montage of firing, running, firing, running. The goldskins catch up with the Mnerrin circle before they reach the river, and there is wild spear jabbing, hand-to-hand combat. Children's shrieks fill the air.

At last they reach the river and form a corridor as I had taught them. Children rush down it; women hobble after, babies in arms, and fling themselves into the deep channel, followed by the men. Goldskins rove the banks, searching futilely for some shallow place where they can get at their prey. I lurk behind, picking them off as I can. I do not think many of them are clearly aware of me. Finally, when they pause at the beach, I have a clear shot at a mass of them, and wreak scorching havoc. Sintana is busy chasing stragglers.

There is a moment's lull. I stand up to look — and am jolted by a blow. A spear shaft in my shoulder. But moments later I am aware that Sintana is by me, having dispatched my attacker.

"Pull this out of me, Sintana."

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He does so, surprisingly gentle. Gritting my teeth, I watch the ripples that mean Mnerrin are reaching the sea.

"Is there much blood?"

"Some."

"Pack that moss in the hole." I cut off a length of rope and make a sling for my arm. Fortunately, the spear doesn't seem to have hit anything vital.

"Where are the rest of the goldmen?"

"I don't think there are any more standing," he says with quiet pride. I can see in the moonlight that he is bloodied all over and has a different spear.

"You have been busy. Are you wounded?"

"In the leg. A little."

We go through the moss-packing routine. He has a fat shaft broken off in the big muscle of his thigh.

"That will hurt worse later. How do you like war?"

He grins and sighs together. "I think — too much!"

"Yes, it is like that.... Now, if you can walk, we must find my light and check all the wounded goldskins."

"And kill them?" He makes an eager motion with his spear.

"Yes. All except two, whom we will tie up for questioning."

Then I feel free to do what I'd been desperately longing for. I send out a focused mind-call to the Mnerrin hiding in the water.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes." A head surfaces just inshore of the reef.

"I think it is all safe now. But wait until dawn to come ashore. And — *is Kamir safe?*"

What must be her head surfaces, too, and I receive a sending of such love and longing that I can scarcely resist going to her. "Till daybreak, darling. Now I have work to do."

"Always work!" Her laugh, my mermaid's laugh, rings out over the water, piercing me with sweet memories. I sigh, and turn back to the job.

Sintana and I go first to the pile of goldskins I created on the beach, and then start searching systematically through the marshes for gleams of gold. Their shining skins are a great liability.

"In the future we will not be able to assume all is over so soon. They will learn to take us more seriously, and arrange a second wave of attackers to come in just as the Mnerrin think all is safe."

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We also come upon three Mnerrin dead and two wounded, men whom I don't know well, and three children who have been stabbed. To my amazement, a dark figure is there, bending over a child. I hold my fire just in time, as the mind-signal comes.

"Mavru! What are you doing here?"

"I swam upriver and waited," he replies. "I thought I might be more needed here."

"And you are. Wonderful. Mavru, meet my friend from the lost village. He has worked hard in your defense."

The two Mnerrin greet warmly. I go in search of my medical supplies to help Mavru, and we resume our search of the marsh.

Long before we are through, Sintana is weary of killing the wounded. His battle fever has ebbed; only when a "corpse" surprises him by striking at him does it return briefly. This, I think, is a good lesson for him.

We save two captives who seem in fairly good shape, and tie them up far apart, so they can't communicate. As I'd been told, they seem to have no mind-speech except a sort of alarm call, and a threat-sending, a hostile blare.

When the moons go down, we rest and eat. Mavru joins us.

"Their bodies are different from ours," he says. "I think I will cut up one or two, and find where the vital centers are. Do you think that's a good plan, 'Om Jared?"

I agree, and warn him about the dangers of handling cadavers. "You must wash your hands scrupulously. . . . I, too, would like to see."

Sintana, meanwhile, has been questioning the nearest prisoner. He has picked up a few words of their tongue, which sounds barbarous in contrast to the Mnerrin's.

"I asked him why they ate children," he reports. "He only shrugged and said, because they were hungry. So I asked him why they did not catch fish. He seems not to understand. I think anything connected with water is entirely strange to them. I remember there was a great fuss about who was going to go in the canoes."

"And that reminds me," I tell him. "We must go and try to salvage those canoes and fix up my boat."

"Why do we want those ugly canoes?"

"First, to keep them out of the hands of any more goldskins who come here. And, most important, I think our people can use them on the Long

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Swim. They could transport the wounded; some will take a long time to heal. And babies could go in them, too."

"Oh, good idea. Hey, it's like you said: my leg hurts more."

"I'm sorry. But we have a job to do."

We check the other prisoner, who glares at us mutely, and hike down the beach to where the dinghy lies. It's untouched, thank the gods, and the repair kit, like all my supplies, is fastened inside. The spacer's gooey stuff really works well, but will take an hour to dry.

We leave it and climb over the headland to where two canoes float aimlessly in the little cove. A moon is rising again; I can see the glitter of bodies inside. The third canoe is only a prow sticking up. Its former contents are floating about.

"We have to go through the check again," I tell Sintana. "And then we have to fish those corpses out so they won't foul the sea. We can put them on the rocks up here; maybe the crabs will eat them."

Sintana shudders. "Parts, anyway.... I didn't know, when I volunteered to fight, that it included cleaning up the battlefield!"

"It includes whatever it includes," I tell him grimly. But I am suddenly dead tired, and my shoulder is on fire. I have been running on pure adrenaline. Do we really have to do this task? And my boat will take strength to pump up.... The first pink light of dawn is in the sky.

"I have a better plan," Sintana says. "Your people here have been idling in the sea all night." He goes back up on the headland, and I hear him send out a mind-call.

To my astonishment, three heads pop out of the water below us almost at once.

"No need to shout," comes a young voice. "We followed to see what you were up to. Hello, 'Om Jared, I'm Pelya! What do you need?"

We tell them; and soon, to my great pleasure, three sets of strong young arms are hauling dead goldskins ashore and up the rocks. The goldmen are short and compact, heavy-boned.

"How many of you in the sea are wounded?" I ask Pelya.

"Three. And Pavo's mate got a spear through her arm. She is very weak, you know. She died soon after we got to the bar."

"Oh, I am sorry."

"Yes.... But you did so much. We boys have been thinking. We will have to train ourselves to do this thing, to do fighting. War. Some of the

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older men think it is all over, but we don't agree. . . . But 'Om Jared, just *why* do the goldskins attack us?"

"I don't really know, except that it is their nature."

But later, when we have pumped up the dinghy and are leading the procession of canoes back to the village, I tell them what I fear.

"I'm afraid that what I have seen on other worlds may be happening here. Somewhere far to the west, there may be a great many goldskins, so that beaches and food are in short supply. They would be fighting over them, and the losers may pack up and come east, looking for new homes. If that's true, it means that there will be more coming, and more after that, without end. I think they have more babies than you, so the pressures will go on and on. I hope to the gods this isn't true, that this was just a wandering band, but, as I said, I have seen this thing before. That is why I am going to appeal to the power of the Federation to help you. But that will take a long time. Meanwhile, you are wise to try to help yourselves. . . . We can question the prisoners, and it might be good to send a couple of scouts back along their trail to see what we can find out."

"I see," says Pelya, and the other boys agree. For once they do not laugh.

Nor do I. In the growing light I can see the Mnerrin coming ashore. There is old Maoul, there is Agna, and Donnia, helping Kamir. I can already sense tendrils of contact, carrying gratitude to me. I hope there are not to be speeches. I am dead. And all too keenly, I realize that I have now broken all the Federation's Rules of Contact. I have interfered massively with the Mnerrin's life-ways, and I have taken a decisive part in a war. . . . So be it.

WAKE UP, 'Om Jared! Kamir is giving birth!"

It is Agna's voice. I come to, groggily.

We are in Agna's birthing hut. Kamir is lying beside me on the crude bed, which is covered with moss and hay. She is on her side, curled around her vast belly, her hands pushing at it as though trying to push it away from her. Agna is beside her, doing something. I hear Kamir whimper.

Gently, Agna takes her hands and pats them.

"Here," he says to me. "Hold."

I take the hands. Kamir's eyes open and meet mine. With effort, she smiles. "Don't be afraid, darling. This is normal."

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Normal? I am looking for some sort of opening, some birth canal through which the babies will emerge. There is no sign of anything like that. Instead, Agna's hands seem to be working on the "scar" or line I had seen running around her abdomen. He is kneading it, carefully pulling it apart. I see that the scarlike line is starting to separate, like long, thread-like lips.

"In a moment now," he tells Kamir. "You can push."

Kamir puts her hands with mine up on her great belly. It is hot, hot. Then she pushes at it again.

Suddenly, with a dreadful caving-in feeling, her whole belly, containing the fetuses, starts to *separate* from the rest of her body! It tips forward, away from her, as the scarlike "lips" open. Agna is furiously working at this line, pushing his hands under her. She whimpers again. I see that the lips are actually a deep separation line, encircling her whole belly, from ribs to pelvis. Oh gods, what is happening here?

Slowly, deliberately, yet too fast for me to follow, the fetal mass tips forward farther. revealing a deep cleavage. It tips, separates farther yet, and then rolls over, away from her, onto what has been the outside of her belly. Agna steadies it. Kamir gives a series of loud sighs, and then rolls away from it, onto her back.

"Whew! That feels better."

But I have a horrifying look at the shell of her body left after the fetal mass tore loose. From diaphragm to hips, it is *empty*, covered by a rapidly thickening gel membrane. Through it I can see, under her ribs, a dark mass pulsing; her heart. Below that, by her spine, I can see the great cords of nerve and blood vessel running along her backbone, inside her empty flanks, to her hips and pelvis. Nothing more.

Agna is looking, too, as the membrane becomes opaque.

"See? Almost no fat at all. My poor little sister will not live long."

"Why?" — But the answer is before me. Stomach, intestines, digestive organs — all are gone, taken away with the fetus-bearing mass of her belly. She has no means of taking in food. A fast-sealing tube end that must be her esophagus is visible near her heart. I can only hope that her kidneys are left, so she won't die of thirst.

I am squeezing her hands so tightly, I must be hurting her. I relax them and make myself kiss her face, despite the ghastly display of her body. She strokes my hair with trembling hands.

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"I'm fine. See to the babies."

The babies? Dimly, I am realizing that this is no catastrophe, but a natural process of parturition. Or rather, it is a catastrophic process, deadly to the mother. But the babies are alive, the fetuses; through the gel of the torn-away side, I can glimpse aqueous forms moving vaguely. Clearly, they are too young for independent life. A great placenta lies on them, with coils running to each fetus — there are three. And there must be some sort of secondary heart with them; there is the throb of circulation.

Indeed, this mass that has torn itself loose from Kamir is almost a primitive animal in its own right, with organs it has stolen from Kamir.

To me, it is a monster, which has mutilated and killed my mermaiden, my girl.

But Kamir is gazing at it with fond eyes. Her babies.

I make myself look at it. It is a globular mass about half a meter in diameter, lying on what had been the outside of Kamir's abdomen. All the part that had been inside Kamir is covered with this gel membrane, now fast thickening to opacity. Agna is bent over it, inspecting and feeling it all with tender hands. He points out a circular ring, or tube, set in the "top."

"That is where we feed the babies."

Oh gods; it is the remains of Kamir's esophagus, leading to her stolen stomach. I begin to shake with delayed horror, scarely noticing that Donnia has come in, and is offering to me, of all things, a great bowl of butterfish, cut in pieces. When I see it, I am revolted at his apparent callousness.

"Fathers first," says Agna. He and Donnia each take some and begin to chew.

Then I am even more revolted by the understanding of what they are doing. They are taking food for the fetuses, substituting for their mother's missing mouth. Preparing it for digestion by her stomach, somewhere inside that monstrous package. Grimly, I force myself to take some and begin to chew. A vaguely consoling thought comes to me: many Terran birds feed their new-hatched chicks like this.

Weakly, Kamir demands some, too. Now that her huge pregnancy has gone, I can see how thin the rest of her has become. Her limbs are no longer slender, but bone-thin, and her beautiful face has been fined to where it seems all great dark blue eyes. But how short a time ago it was

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that we played and tussled each other on our magic isles! What a terrible thing I have wrought on my little mermaid; what evil I have done! Yet she seems strangely content, her eyes luminous with joy when she gazes on the dreadful lump that contains our babies. Mysterious are the ways of instinct! Something in her makes her accept happily the shortness of her life for its irrational reward.

Agna is speaking to me. "Empty your mouth into this, new-father." He grasps the tube opening on the monster and pulls it free. I realize, for Kamir's sake, I must.

It would have been appalling were it not that the fetus-monster has an oddly attractive smell. Organic, but very sweet and clean. A lure to feed it, I think. Well, it works.

After I have fed it in this strange fashion, Agna and Donnia follow suit, and last, Kamir. "Are there three?" she asks.

"Yes," says Agna. "Lucky you did not make more. It will be a job to feed these; they also have no fat."

"I wonder what they will look like," Kamir says dreamily. She is sinking into sleep. Yet she turns to me and hugs me, with a momentary return of her old strength.

"Oh, my darling strange one, I am so happy! Never did I think I would have babies to watch over. Never! And you came from the skies and gave them to me." She kisses me again.

"But —" Looking at her exquisite young face, my heart feels as though it will burst then and there. How can she be truly happy? Wait; is it conceivable she doesn't know her fate?

"I hope I will live to see them. I must. I *will*." She sinks back, blue eyes brave with resolve.

She knows, all right.

Agonized, I watch her drift smiling into sleep. Donnia is nudging me, holding out the bowl of fish. I turn to my detested duty. I am very tired.

I wake to morning light.

Kamir is beside me. The monstrous baby-package is still there.

"Hello, my darling. How you slept! Do you know you fell asleep in the middle of feeding our babies? Fighting must be very tiring."

"Yes."

"I did some!" she tells me. "A goldskin came at me, and I burned him

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with the little weapon you gave me! But he was so strong. All falling down, he kicked me where the babies were. I was afraid he'd injured them. Then Agna came and helped me run away, to the men. And, oh, I was so glad when you came back."

"I was, too."

"Agna and Donnia have gone for more fish. See how the babies are stirring? That means they're hungry."

I see signs of movement within the fetus-package. Gods, what appetites!

"Tell me, darling. How long will they stay like that?"

"Oh, twenty, thirty, forty days; it varies. I think ours will come out sooner, because they were with me so long. That's why I think I can live to see them."

Twenty days! Is that the span of our time?

"Don't talk about dying. If you die, the sun of my life will go out."

"Oh, don't *you* say that, although it is beautiful. If things were the other way round, it's how I would feel, too. When you were so long in coming, I feared the sun of my life had gone out."

And we have more private things to say, until Kamir pushes me away with "Friends come!"

"I think it is that fierce boy, what's his name — Sintana. And old Maoul."

There is a knock on the hut wall. Even I can pick up Sintana's mind.

"Greetings, all."

They come in and sit on Agna's log. I see that Maoul is actually carrying a spear.

I congratulate him again on having got the Mnerrin to form their circle.

"It *was* a task," he admits. "I only wish Pavo had heeded."

"People panic and forget. He thought the way looked clear — he forgot that goldskins can run faster than a man with children."

"Listen, 'Om Jared," Sintana interrupts. "We have got some news out of our captives. They say there are no more goldskins on this island, or nearby, but there are many, many more very far to the west. That sounds like your theory."

"Yes. I was never sorrier to be right. Did you ask why they eat your children?"

"Yes. They say they had a group of somethings, and they ate them. But they

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died — from drowning, I think. Animals about so high." He put a hand about a meter from the ground. "And I think they have come on others like us and taken their children, too."

"A flock or herd of meat animals. . . . This is common on other worlds. It seems clear they don't regard you as people, but as a sort of food animal. They might get the idea of taking a group of you captives and eating the young."

Maoul's face is a mask of fury, but he says nothing.

"We're not people because we don't fight — is that it?" Sintana asks.

"Something like that. Did you ask about their own children?"

"No, but he saw one of our women die, and seemed to understand. He said their women do not die like that."

"H'mm. . . . A real mutation. That fits, too. A higher birthrate."

"Mutation?" asks Maoul.

"A word we use when some of a group of beings become quite different. It usually starts with one or a very few, and the new form spreads because their offspring survive better."

"This sounds interesting," Maoul says. "I wish we had time to talk of it now."

I laugh. "You are learning bad ways, friend. In the old days you would have gone ahead and discussed some topic no matter what practical matters called you."

He laughs, too, somewhat sadly. "I feel I have aged ten years since day before yesterday. But what must we do with these goldskins now? Kill them, as Sintana says?"

I'm glad he's said it. "Yes, I'm afraid so. You can't take them on the Long Swim, and if you let them go, they will certainly make their way back to the main goldskin group and lead others here. That way they gain cheftancy. . . . If you are revolted by killing them, would you rather I did it?"

"No," says Sintana.

"I am revolted," says Maoul. "But I will do it. It is right."

"Then will you let me give you one last lecture about this?"

"Speak on. Your last lectures saved our lives."

"I'm very glad. You know I feel one with you. Your pain is mine, too. Listen: *It is very hard to kill helpless men — or women — in cold blood.* And they will be talking, pleading, promising anything, to save their lives. They will promise not to bring others, to stay and wait for you, to work

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for you. They may claim they are not like the other goldskins, but that the others made them attack you. They may claim they can guide you to somewhere, that they have secret weapons. They may fall down and clutch your ankles and beg for mercy. They may tell you that they have young children to care for — anything! They may swear they never ate of the children's meat. Remember, to them, a promise made to an enemy need not be kept; lies told to an enemy or an inferior do not count. They will be talking and acting solely to save their worthless lives. What you must keep in front of your minds is that they have eaten your children and got caught trying to kill more. Then strike! Close your ears completely, and strike! And beforehand, send away any softhearted one who might be fooled."

The two men think this over for a moment.

"It seems very difficult," says Maoul. "What if we took them by surprise, while they are sleeping?"

"No, that is not the best way. And *you* would be surprised at how quickly they woke up and read your intent — because this is what they themselves would do. No; you should be brave and tell them, and ask them if they have some supernatural entity they pray to. Tell them to do so now."

"I have heard of such a thing," says Maoul.

"If you need more, remember that it is as necessary to kill them as to stamp out sparks of fire nearing your hut. Do you think your resolve will hold?"

Maoul sighs, straightens up; Sintana takes a deep breath.

"Thank you for warning us, 'Om Jared. I think we can do this thing."

"Good. It will be harder for you, Maoul. Sintana has already had a taste of it. But to you, maybe this saying from my land will help. We have had wars and fighting — too much, as I told you. And one of our wise men said, 'They who live by the sword must die by the sword.' You have met *Homo ferox*, who lives by the spear. That was their choice. Now they must die by it."

"Yes," Maoul nods gravely. "I see."

Kamir has been listening wide-eyed. "How many evil things you know, dear 'Om Jared," she says. "Oh, Agna and Donnia come."

Then Maoul shakes his head, as if to chase out dreadful thoughts, and says in his normal tones, "But I have also come to tell you that we must

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leave soon for the Long Swim. Only two of the women yet live, and the star we call The Wind Bringer has appeared. The season of storms will be on us if we don't go soon. So we will be leaving you, man-from-the-skies. What will you do? Will you come with us?"

"I was expecting this," I tell him. "I know you are late. I don't dare come with you; the call from my ship may come at any time. When it does, I must go with all speed back to the island where I left my camp and the little sky-ship that will take me up to them. I can take Kamir and the babies. But someone will have to come to take over the babies when I leave. Of course, I will give him the boat and anything else I have that would be useful to you."

Agna and Donnia, who have come in with baskets of butterfish, join us in time to hear all this. Conscientious fathers, they are already chewing. Donnia speaks up.

"I can go with him, Maoul."

"And I," says Sintana unexpectedly. "Every day I am with him, I learn. But I can't make a swim alone, like this." He taps his still nearly bald head.

"I wish I could stay with you, 'Om Jared and little sister," says Agna. "But I must go to relieve the friends who are caring for my five little ones."

"I shall be delighted at your company, companion-of-battles."

"Well then, that is settled," says Maoul, rising. "You will await your signal, while we leave, I think, on the second morning."

"Are you taking the canoes?" I ask as they leave.

"We're thinking about that. Right now I have this evil job to do," says Maoul, and they depart.

We go back to feeding the baby-monster. Just as I have contributed my mouthful to the sweet smelling sac, Agna pushes past me.

"Hold a moment; let me look."

Gently, he rocks the baby-sac until he can see beneath. I notice a bluish-black discoloration at the bottom, where the membrane joins with what had been Kamir's skin.

"How long has this color been here?" he demands.

No one knows. Kamir has struggled up to look. "What is it, Agna? What's wrong?"

"Trouble." He tips the big bundle up so we can all see the bottom on which it has been resting. The evil-looking purplish color is heavy there,

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with yellowed streaks in it. "I think that is about where that goldskin struck you."

"Yes," says Kamir. "Oh, I feared he had harmed them! We must get Mavru."

"I go!" says Donnia, and ducks outside. We can hear him break into a splashing trot in the stream.

When Mavru comes and sees, he looks grave.

"One of the babies is, I fear, dead. I must cut it away, lest the trouble spread to others. 'Om Jared, I need the sharpest possible knife. May I borrow yours?"

"Yes. And I'll clean it as thoroughly as I can first." My shark knife takes a keen edge and will stand heat.

Mavru calls for an armful of moss, and washes his hands thoroughly in the stream outside. Then he produces a packet of long, slender thorns. "I have dipped these in your cleaning solution," he tells me. "They are for sewing."

He turns to the fetal package and carefully turns it over to show the discolored side. This had been the outside of Kamir's belly; it looks eerie to see her navel there. Mavru is studying the stains, figuring where to make his cuts, as carefully as any surgeon of a technical culture. There are no magical passes, no shamanism.

When he is ready, he slices into the mass with delicacy and boldness, beyond the farthest stain of blue, and continues around to the side, folding back the skin. The characteristic sweet odor of the babies fills the hut, but it is mixed with the sickening smell of infection.

Kamir winces in sympathy as he cuts, but says nothing.

The exposed mass of flesh and organs looks a healthy pink. I can see a tiny pink foot through the membrane enclosing it. Mavru gropes deep into the sac with both hands now. I find myself feeling queasy, and quickly turn my head away. When I look back, Mavru has pulled out a nasty-looking length of stained purple and yellow gut. He drops it into the waste-moss and reaches in again. Exposed now is a discolored fetal sac. He palps it carefully, and mutters, "Dead." He sighs, and with one quick gesture pulls and flips the fetus out and onto the moss, its umbilical cord tight.

Mavru pays no more attention to it, but goes into the wound with his knife, cutting the cord far in, and cutting away all infected tissue. Very

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little of the dark purple blood flows. I notice he is careful not to contaminate the knife by cutting into infection. He seems to know the anatomy of the fetal sac well.

When he has finished, the hollow he has made where the dead baby was is clean-looking, with only the ends of a few thorn-sewn vessels sticking out. Mavru inspects it with care, then bends down and sniffs, thoroughly. Satisfied, he asks me, "A dusting of your wonderful powder now?"

"I think so, yes."

He takes the antibiotic flask out of his loincloth and dusts sparingly. Then he takes up clean moss and carefully packs the wound, pulling the skin back as far as it will go and fixing it with thorns.

No advanced surgeon could have done better with the tools at hand.

At last, he turns away from his completed task and, with the point of his knife, slits the discolored membrane off the discarded dead fetus.

I gasp.

Lying there on the moss is what appears to be a Human baby boy, an infant almost ready to be born. There can be no doubt that I have fathered this child; it is no parthenogenetic alien, but Human in every way that I can see. My son. My almost-son. . . . What about the other two?

Kamir is staring, too. "Oh, what that goldskin did," she mutters through clenched teeth. "Oh, my little stranger baby! How beautiful! He is — was — just like you, dear 'Om Jared. What about the others? Are they all right?"

"I believe so," says Mavru. "I think we caught this in time. And they are like us, by the way: Mnerrin, if that is to be our name. I had a good look at both their feet, and they have our fins, as this poor little lad had not." He touches the dead baby's Human toes.

"Are they to be girls or men?" Kamir asks.

"Oh, I couldn't tell. But one is definitely larger."

I have pulled myself together. "Healer Mavru, all our thanks. Now tell me: on most worlds, it is customary to pay Healers, or give them a present. What may we do for you? Of course I will send you my good knife when I go, but there must be something else."

He starts to wave me away, but checks. "Well, if you are serious, would it be improper to ask that you give me this dead baby to study? I want to compare it with our own. And it might help me if ever I have to deal with more Humans."

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"Gladly," I say. "And you will, of course, bury him with a little marker or whatever is appropriate?"

"Yes. With a marker saying it is the first Human child born of Mnerrin."

"But —," says Kamir. "Oh, but. . . ." Then she seems to reconsider. "I guess it's all right, Father Mavru. Only. . . ."

"I know," says Mavru compassionately. "I know. I thank you very much. And this will solve what might be a problem for you."

It would indeed. I had been thinking that.

When he goes out, taking the baby, Agna and Donnia hurry in to resume the feeding. I hold Kamir quietly for a while to comfort her — and myself.

THAT EVENING, Agna and I take a few minutes off to go down and join the conclave on the beach. The Mnerrin habitually gather here to watch the sunset and chat. Agna leads me around to the five men and their children who have been caring for his young. The babies are all appealing plump little Mnerrin, three girls and two boys, one of whom can already swim strongly, as Agna demonstrates.

Old Maoul is here, too, earnestly debating something with several men.

"They are deciding whether to take the canoes," Agna tells me. "I think we will. Normally the babies swim, fastened to their father, but that, of course, slows us down. If they were in a canoe, we could travel faster. The two wounded men and Elia could go in them, too. But some of the older men are afraid that this will change our way of life too much."

"I can understand that. . . . Hello, Sintana. How goes it?"

The young man has a worried look. "'Om Jared, do you know any way to keep those canoes from tipping so easily? That is one of the objections to taking them. I thought that if they had a down-thrusting wood piece below, it would stabilize them, but I don't see how to do that."

Inventive boy. "That's what we call a keel. It would indeed stabilize the canoes, but it would also hit rocks, if it was long enough to do good. But there is another way, which we call outriggers." I smooth off a spot of sand and draw him a picture.

"I see. But there isn't time to build these, 'Om Jared."

"Well, can you produce two long logs each, and some rope? I'll show

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you a quick-and-dirty version." I make another sketch, showing a canoe with a log loosely lashed on each side. "The idea is that the logs must be loose enough to float when the canoe is loaded. It will slow down the paddling a bit, but you will be surprised at how hard it is to tip.... Want to try it?"

"Absolutely! I knew I could count on you, 'Om Jared!"

I reflect that it is best I leave before my meager store of information runs out. Meanwhile, Agna is looking wistfully at the group still deep in their study of Relations.

"I used to love that," he says. "But now I am so rusty."

"My case, too," I tell him. "Tell me, what are those men playing at? It looks like a game I know."

"Oh, it's an old game we all love. Legend has it that the other man-who-came-from-the-skies taught it to our forefathers. Do you really recognize it?"

"Yes, I think it is a game called 'chess' — only, the pieces are carved a little differently."

"Yes — 'chess,' you say? We call it 'Shez'! It must be the same. So some legends are true!"

But I have something else on my mind.

"Agna, Donnia says that you know the straight-line direction to the island where I left my sky-ship. Can you show me? Then I can set my instrument here. It would be much quicker than retracing my steps."

"Yes, I do. Don't you recall, when we first started home with Kamir, you showed me where you'd come from? Let's go in the water; I'll give you the line."

We swim out, and Agna submerges for a few minutes. When he comes up, he has one arm pointed west-southwest. I set my compass pointer.

"You must have thrown something in the sea there," says Agna disapprovingly. "I could sense alien stuff in the current."

"Yes, I fear my ship must have sprayed exhaust when I landed. And it will again when I take off. I'm sorry — I hope it will dissipate soon."

"Oh, it's almost gone," Agna concedes.

"The island is such a small, flat one, Agna. Do you think this line will really carry me to it? At least, near enough to see it?"

"Yes," he says firmly. "If I were swimming, I'd say seven days."

"Good enough." Then something inside me lurches, as if a curtain were

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rent. "No, *bad!*" I blurt. "*Agna, I don't want to leave!*"

He looks at me with affection. "I know. I, too, will miss you. But speak to Maoul of this. I am not sure you know your own mind."

"Yes. I will," I say, near weeping.

When we get ashore, I confide my feelings to Maoul.

"I know, I know," he tells me. "You are sending sadness all about. But tell me: If you go, you *can* return, can't you?"

"Yes."

"While if you stay here, if you refuse this sky-ship, no other may come for you, right?"

"True."

"And if you go, you may be able to help us against the goldskins? And in other ways," Mavru says.

"I can try. I can always do something, even if only to send you weapons and supplies."

"You could not do that if you stay here."

"No. . . . Oh, I see what you mean. If I truly love you and want to help you, I should go. . . . And I should take the course that is not irrevocable, which again means I should go."

"That is my thought."

I sigh deeply. "Then it is my thought, too. Thank you, Father Maoul. . . . But, oh, I shall miss this world so."

He, too, sighs. "It has been for you a happy time, out of your real life, which we cannot imagine. But for us, this is real life, with all its good and evil."

I see what he means, and bow my head. To me, this is still a dream-world, though the people are real. I have not been truly into life here, as I would have to be if I stayed. As I would have to be if I come back to stay. Dreams must end.

"You are wise."

He shrugs this off. I see Agna looking at me anxiously. It is time to go back and feed.

And just then, in the midst of everything, I hear a loud, familiar sound from the hut. Everyone looks up.

"What is that?"

"A beep from my transponder. That is, a signal that the ship that will carry me away has come into your sun's system. I now have only a few

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days to get back to that island. If they have to wait, they will charge me money, and I can pay for only two days."

"Pay?" asks Maoul.

"A system of portable value we use for returning the favors of people we may never meet again."

"Legend says," Maoul tells me, "that the one who came here before tried to explain something of this. To us, it sounded unharmonious."

"Unharmonious" is a term they use for, roughly, *uncivilized* and perhaps inhumane. It amuses me to hear our great economic system so brusquely — if perhaps justly — dismissed.

I bid Maoul good night, and return with Agna to the hut.

That night, Kamir faints for the first time.

The last day passed quietly. I cannot bring myself to start until the Mnerrin leave.

I watch them making up seaproof packets of their scant possessions, and, one by one, placing them in the canoes. They consist primarily of a few small looms and supplies of thread, a musical instrument someone has been working on, some pots, several large pieces of cloth. I reflect on how little of their rich life would remain for archaeology if anything happens to the Mnerrin themselves.

When it comes to the spears and shields, the canoe paddlers object. "There will be no room left for the babies and the wounded men." In the end a few are taken.

I watch a burial party taking the body of the last woman up into the hills. In the past I have avoided looking at such scenes, though I knew they went on. But now I wonder how soon I may have to undertake such a grim trip myself.

Kamir is all over her fainting fit, and says she is looking forward to traveling again. I marvel at how she can do with no food except the clear broths we make for her. She drinks more water than before; perhaps it has some richness in it. I would give an arm for an intravenous feeding rig. There will be one on that big ship. I have wasted hours trying to figure how I could get it to her.

The last night, there is much singing. Kamir asks to be taken to the beach. I pick her up, almost weeping to find how light she is. She who only weeks ago had been my strong little mermaid, rolling me in the sand. . . .

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Now she weighs scarcely as much as the canteens I bring with us.

On the beach I pack moss around her poor knobby knees and hips, and prop her up where she can greet all. The Mnerrin are kind to her, particularly Sintana and his friends, who rally her about "fighting like a man."

The singing rises around us, sweet and true. Kamir joins in, surprisingly strongly. I hold my face up to the moons and wish I could howl like a hound. Dreamworld or not, I love these people, love Kamir. Even love my dead son, and the other two. . . . Of that last night, I shall say no more.

The next morning, there is a surprise — one of the rare fogs has closed in. It makes no difference to the Mnerrin's plans. The canoes are loaded; I see the fathers of toddlers tying them to the thwarts. The first shift of paddlers is in place.

And then they simply walk into the sea. Many turn to wave at us, and for the last time I get the impact of so many blue, blue eyes. Then they are gone undersea and into the fog, leaving only the dark shapes of the canoes. The paddlers dig in rhythmically, and the canoes, too, fade and vanish into the white wall.

It is very lonely on the beach.

But it is time for us to go, too. Donnia and Sintana carry the boat to the beach, and return for the sac of babies. I am astonished to see how they have grown in the last days; the skin now seems almost too small for the full-size infants within. I carry Kamir down, and arrange her in the stern beside me. The babies, and big pot of fish, go in front, where she can touch them. It has been arranged to stop every hour for feeding, since I can do little while driving the boat, and Kamir is so weak.

Then the two Mnerrin wade out into the bay. I follow, expecting them to want Agna's heading once they are past the reef. Instead, they simply submerge briefly and start off, straight on target. Wonderful instrument, those guide-hairs! Even Sintana's fuzz seems long enough to give him some help.

Then we set off behind them, much as we had arrived, except that different arms are flashing ahead. And Kamir lies dying at my side. We settle into the dreamlike trance of travel over the blue sea, and the mists gradually clear.

And that's about it.

On the third day, there is a tear in the babies' envelope, and the whole

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skin looks dry and different. Kamir is excited: her eyes glow; she seems to be keeping herself alive on sheer will. But she can't speak. "I will see them!" she whispers to me.

On the fourth morning, it is difficult to feed. Donnia says that the babies must come out. He grasps the edges of the torn skin and pushes it down. It peels away; a shriveled placenta comes with it. As we tear it loose, the two babies roll out on the moss. One is exposed — I see it breathing — but the other is still in its fetal covering. I cut it free quickly, and the baby takes a great gulp of air and begins to cry — the immemorial infant squall. It is a Mnerrin baby, and so is the other, a girl and a boy.

Kamir tries to crawl toward them, her eyes burning hungrily. "Wait, darling," I tell her. We swab the babies off, and put them in her arms.

"They're perfect," Donnia says.

But after a moment her head falls to one side. She has fainted, I hope, and take her in my arms. She breathes for a minute or two; that is all. She is dead in my arms, with the babies in hers.

Gently, we take them from her and feed them. To me, they seem sturdy little things, but Donnia says they are thin. "We have work to do."

There is an island nearby, a pretty one with a mountain. We take Kamir's body there, up above the dunes, with a headstone on which I inscribe words too emotion-laden to repeat here. And we continue. . . .

After a time, it becomes clear that my batteries will more than hold out, so I suggest that both men get in the boat. Thus burdened, our progress becomes something of a wallow, but still much faster than swimming. On the way, I teach Donnia and Sintana to drive it.

And so we arrive, on the morning of the seventh day, at the small island I had left a lifetime ago. The little space-lander is just as I left it; my camp is untouched. As though on signal, my transponder beeps again that evening, signifying that the ship is taking up an orbit above us. I signal her and arrange a rendezvous at dawn, my time.

Then I busy myself with a quick check, and turn to giving away everything I can possibly spare. The lander's big batteries will recharge the boat and the laser; I estimate their battery-lives at years, with a little care. My best knife I send to Mavru via Donnia, along with the big medikit. The laser is for Sintana, and the little one for Maoul. Everything else — blankets, lenses, a small microscope, emergency cook-pans — I heap on them.

"Use your judgment. Something nice for Agna — I wish there were more."

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"It is ample," says Sintana. His eyes are on the lander; I sense that both are anxious to see it go up.

But there isn't room for them to stay on the island, with the exhaust. So I bid them farewell and send them out in the boat. They seem reluctant to have me leave. As they motor out, I catch a last gleam of blue.

Waiting to lift, I allow myself to think of what has haunted me, ever since the goldskins' coming.

On ancient Terra, there was once another race of Humans. They were big-brained and, some think, unaesthetically formed. They flourished for a time, leaving few signs except their bones and a grave lined with flowers. We call them Neanderthals. And then came Cro-Magnon, our direct ancestors, and after that, Neanderthal was seen no more.

What happened, no one knows — whether some interbred, or whether they were wiped out in one of our first acts of genocide. (We left no living close relatives.) What thoughts Neanderthals thought, what intellectual discoveries they made, no one will ever know. They were strong; the fact

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that they disappeared at Cro-Magnon's advance must have been partly a matter of temperament. Perhaps they were noncombative.

Have I been seeing the start of just such a tragedy? I have no illusions about the Mnerrin's ability to defend themselves against *Homo ferox*. Their wonderful artifacts of song and thought reside in their minds; their act of Relations is literally written on the sands. If they go under, no one will ever know that here men were following the thinking of Pythagoras, in a wholly different technological context. But they do not need the technology, except now, for self-defense.

No. No one would ever know — any more than we will ever know the color of the eyes that looked out from under Neanderthal's shaggy mane. Perhaps they were clear, and filled with compassion and the growing light of reason. We cannot know. We have, I fear, killed them. And I fear, I greatly fear, that those lost eyes were a brilliant blue.

Now I have made my record. To you who hear it, I beg, allow yourselves to imagine how it was. To be moved. To help! Surely the Federation could spare one small party to sort this out, to transport the goldskins to another planet. To save what can never be replaced of peace and beauty, of mind.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

NEVERNESS, David Zindell (Donald I. Fine, cloth, $18.95)

DAVID ZINDELL'S first novel, *Neverness*, is set in the same future as his compelling story "Shanidar," which was the standout of the first *Writers of the Future* anthology. But the novel bears the same relation to the novelet that a ten-lane interstate bears to a country road.

This is, at first glance, a space-opera future, set in a city without telephones, where the major mode of land transportation is ice skates, while members of the Pilots' Guild pop in and out of windows in the manifold, finding intricate pathways between stars. In true Romantic fashion the pilots embark on quests, answering the call of the Timekeeper. In five hundred or so pages we live through rivalry between father and son, incest, intrigue, murder, resurrection, unmasking, and conversations between gods who once were human and humans who will soon be gods. There is a starfaring race that goes about devouring stars, and another that left a vital message for mankind before going off to live in a black hole. I can't remember reading a better Romance in all of science fiction.

But Zindell doesn't do just one thing. This novel does everything. The characters are not the one-dimensional role-fillers that are usually all that Romance requires. They change and grow, they become real. The grand events unfold through their utterly believable behavior in a fully-invented milieu.

It is also excellent hard science fiction, with serious treatment of difficult mathematical and genetic questions. Have you wondered what all the "extra" or "junk" genes in our

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DNA are for? Can space be folded so that every star is near every other star? Pilots meld with their ship's computers and then maneuver through the stars by constructing mathematical proofs that the movement they need to make is possible.

Ideas splash out of Zindell's mind and flow across the pages of this book — yet the action doesn't stop for them. Rather the ideas pick up the story and sweep it along. Ultimately, the story is about the search for the meaning, the purpose, the secret of life. Zindell has the audacity to answer that great question. And it is in his daring to answer it that this book becomes, not just a brilliant novel, but a strong and serious view of human potential.

There are obvious echoes of Gene Wolfe in *Neverness.* Zindell has picked up some of Wolfe's stylistic quirks — lists of arcane and archaic words, for instance ("eschatologists, cetics, akashics, horologes ... scryers, holists, historians, remembrancers, ecologists, programmers, neologicians, and cantors" — all of which are used in the story; Zindell does not list in vain). It is daring to invite comparison with Wolfe, and sometimes a bit embarrassing. For instance, when Zindell lists all the different kinds of bars in one district of the city Neverness, he ends the list by saying, "Somewhere — and why not? — there is a bar for those wishing to talk about what is occurring in all the other bars." Such anticlimax — such an *obvious* punchline. Wolfe would surely have done a double-twist, like "A bar for those who believe there are no bars, and another for those who believe there are bars, but do not believe anyone has ever seen one."

But that is early in the book. Zindell soon becomes himself strongly enough that the reader no longer compares him with Wolfe or anyone else. Or rather, while I recognized that Zindell could not match Wolfe at Wolfe's best games, he had some strengths Wolfe doesn't have — for instance, Zindell's individual episodes, powerful as they are, never obscure the main thread of the story, and while his narrator is self-conscious, he remains fundamentally innocent. He remains *young,* so that the narrative is always vigorous, and the narrator doesn't surprise us so much as he joins us in being surprised all over again by what happens in the tale.

Like all the best science fiction writers, Zindell came up with concepts and cultural patterns that required the coinage of words. *Cark:* To alter a human structure at a genetic level, so you permanently change the physical form. *Slel:* To take DNA from someone against his will, to create avatars of him, or perhaps children. *Fenester:* To pass

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through "window" after "window" in the manifold — a verb that science fiction has long needed. Zindell has helped develop our collective language, which is a model of our collective mind.

I wish I had written this book. Not because I admire it (though obviously I do). My feelings are beyond mere jealousy. I wish I had written it because as I read it I heard Zindell say things I had tried to say in many of my own works, but never did, not this clearly, not this fully. I wish I had written it because it is the truth, *earned* truth, truth that grows out of a story that is at once grand and small, brilliant and dark, simple and intricate. I wish I had written it because a storyteller never truly knows a story until he has told it. I have read Zindell's book, and I want to *know* what he knew that allowed him to tell this tale. I want to tell it myself someday.

Robert Silverberg's Worlds of Wonder, Robert Silverberg (Warner, cloth, 368 pp, $17.95)

When a writer's been around as long, has contributed as many outstanding works to the field, and is such an all-around decent human being as Robert Silverberg, he acquires a semi-prophetic stature. While the rest of us can babble at will about what makes for good science fiction, in articles and columns like this one, Silverberg has both the authority and the intelligence to attempt a definitive book.

This remarkable volume seems at first glance to be an anthology —Silverberg's best-ever list of science fiction stories. And, while one can quibble with some choices, you won't find many anthologies whose stories are as relentlessly good as these.

But following each story is a Silverberg essay, which flows smoothly from memoir to literary criticism. He talks about the writer, with illuminating and entertaining stories; then he talks about the story itself, unfolding it brilliantly so that we can understand at least something of what makes the story work.

One of the best things about the science fiction genre is that writers and readers together are still developing the critical theory and language to explain what our stories are for and how they work. At this writing I'm halfway through teaching a course in writing and another course in the science fiction short story. I wish I had had this book to use as the basic text for *both* courses.

But don't be misled by that comment. Not for a moment does *Robert Silverberg's Worlds of Wonder* feel like a textbook. It's more like sitting

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down with a good friend whose informal conversation sparkles, whose wisdom pierces you, whose intelligence makes you smarter just by listening.

Sure, you've probably read most of these stories before. But you've never read them with Robert Silverberg. That makes all the difference.

Starflight, Greg Johnson, Alex Kercso, Bob Gonsalves, T.C. Lee, Rod McConnell (Electonic Arts, Binary Systems; IBM compatibles, color not required; $49.95)

Exodus: Ultima III, Richard Garriott & Charles Bueche (Origin Systems, Inc.; Apple, Commodore, IBM, MacIntosh; $49.95)

Bard's Tale, Michael Cranford (Electronic Arts, Interplay Productions; Apple, Commodore, IBM; $39.95)

This isn't a game review column, but sometimes a computer game moves into the realm of science fiction and fantasy storytelling. I think it's worth pointing out that some computer games are now capable of giving the player an experience somewhat like fiction. The gamewright creates an interesting and perilous world through which the player moves; the player, in turn, becomes the protagonist, the hero, improvising the events of the story. Thus gamewright and player become collaborators, co-author of what can, in the best games, be a strong and fascinating fictional experience.

Starflight is the first science fiction computer game that actually gives you something of the experience of roaming through the galaxy. You visit solar systems and examine planets to see which are suitable for colonization. You land on the planets, mine for valuable minerals, and explore ruins of ancient civilizations, all the while coping with the local fauna. As you voyage, you encounter various races of aliens, and try to make friends with them so you can learn the secrets of the ancients. Eventually, you must visit a strange crystal planet which is causing widespread stellar instability, threatening all life; to stop it, you must make contact with the strangest species of all. I have found this game obsessively fascinating — and the graphics and player interface are superb.

Exodus: Ultima III is one of a long line of computerized Dungeons-and-Dragons spin-offs. Several things make it stand out above the rest: All the idiotic tedium of calculating strength and hit points and such are handled completely by the computer, while the player has simple real-time control over the player's battling. The game does not consist of battling endless moronic monsters — you have to

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converse with local citizens in various towns in order to find valuable clues. There are dungeons — deeply-layered mazes in which you obtain gold, yes, but also arcane marks burned into your skin that allow you to pass into higher levels of play. You must find your way into hidden lands, whose entrances can be startlingly obvious, once you know where they are. Above all, you are free to explore at will, with no set order of solving puzzles until you reach the final objective in the most dangerous dungeon of all. The result is that *Exodus* is a wonderful fantasy adventure.

Bard's Tale exists, I suppose, to show us just how deadly a game can be when the gamewright thinks like a programmer instead of thinking like a storyteller. Obsessed with the possibilities of dazzling graphics, the gamewrights give us lovely pictures — but all the action of the game takes place offscreen, with *words*, not pictures, reporting back the results. The graphics are more dazzling at first than *Exodus's*, but the player soon tires of the same pictures over and over. During the set-up phase of the game, there is a maddening melody that you *can't* turn off — I was ready to tear the game disk in half by the time I finally got into the game. All in all, it's a triumph of programming — and a failure as a game and as a story. Which, I suppose, makes it a failure as a program, too.

The Woman Who Is the Midnight Wind, Terence M. Green (Pottersfield Press, RR2, Porters Lake, Nova Scotia, B0J 2S0, Canada; trade paper, 137 pp)

Terence M. Green is such a quiet writer that it's quite possible to overlook him for a while, possible not to realize that a string of extraordinarily good stories over the last few years have had that same byline.

But the stories have a cumulative effect. As you finish reading one, while the glow is still with you, you remember having experienced somewhere else that undercurrent of achingly sweet lost love, that deep anxiety that wounds but does not kill. And when you reach back in memory — or burrow through the stacks of magazines until you find the issue, the story, and the author's name — it is, of course, Terence Green.

As a reader of this magazine, you no doubt remember "Barking Dogs" (May 1984), "Till Death Do Us Part" (Dec, 1981), or surely, "Point Zero" (May 1986), all fine stories. Best of the lot, to me, is the story "Ashland Kentucky," about a man's bittersweet journey to uncover the mystery of his own family's past. There are other stories

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that have never before appeared in the United States, or only in relatively obscure anthologies.

As is so often the case, I suspect Green will not significantly widen his public until his first novel appears. Certainly this Canadian collection, which you will have to work to obtain, won't soon burden him with the annoyances of excessive fame. Yet for every short story writer, the first book-length collection is a milestone; and if you, as I do, regard short stories and novelets as the heart of science fiction, the place where the genre invents itself, Terence Green's first collection is a milestone for all of us.

A REPLY TO ORSON SCOTT CARD
by *Michael Bishop*

IN THE *February, 1988, F&SF,* Orson Scott Card gives my novel *The Secret Ascension* two reviews, one a generous assessment of its narrative merit and one a heartfelt jeremiad against what he sees as its inhumane portrayal of an American president by the name of Richard Milrose (not Milhous) Nixon. Card concludes, "[Those] who believe that it is the moral dimensions of stories that makes them worth telling will be uncomfortable with a book that perpetrates the literary equivalent of a lynching."

I concede the deep sincerity of Card's biases, and I am sorry that my portrait—caricature, as he correctly terms it—of Richard Nixon offends him. However, it is possible both to write a novel like *The Secret Ascension,* and to read it with enjoyment, without willy-nilly acquiring membership in the National Sodality of Left-Leaning Pinheads or excommunicating oneself from the pious embrace of the Principled Fictioneers of America.

My choice of a villain in a novel based on the life and work of Philip K. Dick was dictated by my subject matter. Dick's novels *Valis* and *Radio Free Albemuth* contain an American politician named Freemount (or Fremont) who is obviously a Richard Nixon figure, and Dick himself felt during his lifetime that the Nixon Administration was persecuting him. Card argues that Nixon is this generation's "easy anti-icon" and that a writer who employs him as a villain may do so "without having to explain why."

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Let me make two points here. First, it is an extraordinary—indeed, almost an *unprecedented*—thing for an American president to become such a "cheap villain" that a writer may bring him on stage to certain boos. How did this happen? The answer is simple and damning: Nixon betrayed the electorate's trust and sullied the highest office in the land. Further, to this day, he has shown no remorse for this betrayal but only for the private miscalculations that drove him from power. Most marginally literate Americans are aware of these facts.

Second, my Nixon is *intended* as a satirical caricature of the unrepentant human being who declared in *No More Vietnams* (with no obvious awareness of the irony of his doing so), "It is the essence of moral responsibility to determine *beforehand* the consequences of our action or inaction." Underscoring the fact that I am essaying satire is a statement in a prefatory Author's Note; moreover, Nixon is the only major character—out of nearly a dozen—whose point of view I deliberately never enter.

Card argues that my hatred of Nixon, my liberal pinheadedness, prevents me from providing "some sort of illumination," " a compassionate explanation of the human heart" of my villainous Nixon, as I have done for the bad guys in my other novels. This was not my purpose in *The Secret Ascension*, which is meant as a tribute to the courage and moral fiber of the "little people" in our society (*a la* Dick's best novels) and a savage indictment not only of Nixon—with his opportunistic red-baiting, his enemy lists, his dirty campaign tricks, his secret bombing of Cambodia, and his smug but demented willingness to play the "madman" for his North Vietnamese enemies—but also of an electorate that, knowing only too well this man's character and tendencies, made him President anyway. Those wanting a "compassionate explanation" of the real Nixon's heart should read *Six Crisis*, *The Memoirs*, or any of the unapologetic apologia he has published since.

Further, I regard my moral revulsion for Nixon as apolitical and nonpartisan. I feel a like distaste for a Democrat now running for President, Gary Hart, and I would not object to an uncompromising satire leveled against him, or any other Democrat, alive or dead, if grounded in the same kind of documentable abuses of power from which my caricature of Nixon stems. But a satire against a dead politician is less "the literary equivalent of lynching"—Nixon, incidentally, spent almost his entire career knotting the noose—than the prose

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counterpart of beating a dead horse. And the living Nixon, if he chooses, can kick against the caricature.

Finally, Card accuses me of the vile crime of denying "another human being's humanity." [The text of *The Secret Ascension* reveals that my Nixon caricature has colluded with his own worst nature to permit his wholesale satanic possession; that is, he has *conspired* in the dehumanizing events that turn him into "monster."] What does this accusation mean? Have I killed the *real* Nixon? Stolen his soul? Wounded him physically in an irreparable way? Ruined his reputation?

Of course not.

The real meaning of Card's acusation is that my portrayal of Nixon has offended him—and so grievously that he has questioned not only the morality of the author but also that of anyone who can read this novel without a similar discomfort. His antipathy to the techniques of satire and his belief that it is past time we forgave this man have led Card to anoint his private political and ethical standards as the only legitimate ones. Again, I am sorry to have offended him, but I am even sorrier that he does not recognize that life and literature *are* two distinct things. And in preemptively implying that *his* position is the only humane and moral one, he is, quite simply, wrong.

Philip Roth's 1974 book *Our Gang* contains a scene in which his Nixon parody, Trick E. Dixon, is assassinated. Although this scene is so tastelessly absurd that only the brain-damaged could suppose it a formula for real-life mayhem, one or two people accused Roth of trumping up a situation that "would fire the will of a would-be Presidential assassin." In an essay reprinted in *Reading Myself and Others* (1975), Roth replied, "Satire is moral rage transformed into comic art.... the imaginative flowering of the primitive urge to knock somebody's block off."

He added, "[And] all I can say to those who will fear for the President's life is that they would do better to lobby for a strong federal gun-control bill than to worry about the influence of *Our Gang* on potential assassins. Admittedly, it might be easier to get [the Attorney General] to push for a bill outlawing literature than for one making it impossible to buy a rifle through the mail for fifteen bucks, but the fact remains, more people are killed in this country every year by bullets than by satires."

Ask anyone. Would you rather be the victim of an unscrupulous national leader's unchecked wrath or the target of ten unbalanced literary attacks by the "dangerous" Michael Bishop?

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Brad Strickland ("Oh Tin Man, Tin Man, There's No Place Like Home," May 1987) returns with a short and surprising tale that begins with the most mundane of conversations and turns into something quite shocking. . .

Caution Sign

By Brad Strickland

"THAT SAID *OWLS*." Joan, sitting on the passenger side of the BMW convertible, half-twisted to look back into the dark.

"What said owls?" Hal's words came out sour and sharp, like the aftertaste of a too-rich dinner. "What do you mean?"

Joan turned back around in the seat. In the dim light reflected through the windshield, Hal could just make out the blonde blur of her hair, the smoothness of her knees —she had kicked off her shoes and was sitting on her folded legs. She said, "I meant the caution sign back there. It was *owls*. O-W-L-S."

Hal's hands were at ten and two on the wheel, clenched and tense. "Slow. It said *slow*. Because of all these trees so close to the highway." They were driving through an avenue, almost a tunnel, of elms, the treetops April-lush with leaves as tender and rounded as mouse ears.

Joan let many seconds pass. "It didn't say *slow*. It was *owls*. I wonder why they'd put up a caution sign about owls?"

Hal growled under his breath. Aloud, he said, "You mixed up the let-

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ters. It's the same four letters in both words, see? S-L-O-W. Rearrange them and you get owls."

Joan moved her legs. Nylon rasped with a dead-leaf sigh on the upholstery. "You're calling me stupid now."

"No. But —"

"Are you saying I'm *brain*-damaged? Like you called Marc? Because I'm *not* brain-damaged. I'm not the one who made a fool of himself tonight."

"Oh, for —" Hal took a deep breath. The BMW still had the new-car smell of leather and expensive alloys. "If I can't say what I think while I'm making conversation with your friends —"

"There's a difference between making conversation and being just plain rude."

"You know I wasn't being rude. I simply told Marc —"

"You should never talk politics when you're drinking."

He made himself answer in a civil tone. "I wasn't drinking."

"That looked like wine to me."

"Two glasses of wine with dinner, then an Irish coffee —"

"Two?"

He sighed. "These damn woods go on forever. Be just like Marc to tell us this was a shortcut just to get back at me." In the glare of the convertible's headlights, the narrow two-lane blacktop was still walled, circumscribed, by smooth trunks pale gray against the blackness of night. "All right, three or four glasses of wine. But that's not *drinking*. Marc had just as much as I did."

"I didn't notice him acting drunk."

Hal grunted. "He had his hands all over you."

"He touched my chair," she said. "He touched my arm."

"You let him."

"You're acting like a high school boy."

"Me? Listen, I just said what any—"

"I know what you said." Joan sniffed. "And I know what that sign back there said. It said owls."

He slowed the car, found a rare wide spot on the shoulder, and wrenched the BMW off the road and to a stop. It sat on the grassy shoulder breathing hard, like a dog after a long run. Hal looked out the side window. The trees were dense black shapes on the other side of the road, hardly visible in the darkness of an overcast midnight. He looked back at

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the indistinct shape of Joan. "I'll make a deal with you. We'll turn around and go look at your sign. If it says *owls*, then as soon as we get home, I'll telephone Marc and tell him that I was wrong. I'll apologize to him and Linda. I'll say I was wrong all the time and Marc was right."

In the faint glow from the dashboard, he saw her chin drop and her head tilt as she gave him a sidelong look. "What if it says *slow*?"

He grinned. "Not so sure now, are you?"

"No. I mean, yes, I am sure, but —"

"Ha."

"— what if I were wrong? I'm not, but if I were wrong, what then? What would you get?"

"A promise."

Her voice became soft with suspicion: "What kind of promise?"

"You promise never to mention this again."

"This? What do you —"

"You know what I mean. I mean this, tonight, going out to dinner, Marc, Linda, the argument, everything. You shut up about it now and forever, world without end, amen. And if you should happen to mention it, *darling*, one day when you're quite unreasonably angry with me about something entirely different —"

"I'm never unreasonable."

" — then I get to have my way with you. Any way I want." His voice made it a singsong, like a joke between them: I-get-to-have . . .my-way-with-you . . . any-way-I-want, a lilting, syncopated rhythm. Then he laughed silently, or maybe just puffed breath through his nostrils.

Her voice was guarded when she answered: "I don't like that kind of a promise."

"You'd probably like it all right if I were more — oh, shall we say, predictable? Like Marc."

"No. Not ever."

"Then we won't go back."

"It's not fair."

"Why not?"

"Because you were wrong tonight, that's why. And now you want me to pretend that you were right all along."

"No, I don't. I want you to prove that I'm wrong now. Or that you're wrong. And you are wrong, darling. No sign would say *owls*, and you know

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it. But you want to argue with me and be right and not even let me check to make *sure* you're right. I just thought I'd call your bluff, that's all. Let's go home."

He put his hand on the gearshift. She put hers over his, stopping him. "Go back," she said.

"Back to the sign?"

"Yes. Back to the owl sign." She let each word fall heavily.

"O.K. You know what you're in for." He turned the wheel sharply, started foward, and barely managed a U-turn in the highway. The other side of the road had no shoulder at all: there was just a narrow ditch, and beyond it were the trunks of the elms. "There's a flashlight in the glove compartment," he said.

She took it out and tested it, flashing it in his eyes. "It works," she said.

"Turn if off before you make me wreck."

She switched the beam off. They drove slowly until the back of the sign came into view ahead and to the left. Hal studied the terrain. The sign was on a tiny hummock; otherwise the opposite verge of the highway had no shoulder. There was, on the other hand, temporarily just enough space on this side to pull off. He did.

"We're facing the wrong way," she said.

"I can U-turn here, but we'd miss seeing the sign if I did. It may be miles before I can make the turn again. I'm not going that far to prove to you that the sign says *slow*."

"It says *owls*," Joan insisted, though her voice held no confidence now.

"Give me the flashlight."

"I'm coming, too." She thrust the light into his hands, and he felt the barrel of it, matte-smooth. It was a small flashlight, but an expensive one, with considerable power. He heard Joan scraping for her shoes. He switched off the engine and the lights. "Wait!" she said.

He waited. When she had her shoes on, he opened the door and heard her open hers. He stepped into the cool April night and closed the door, shutting off the courtesy light. As she came around the car with slow steps, one hand on the side of the convertible for support, he turned on the flashlight — the night was shockingly dark now, with the headlights off, and only the thin white beam giving any illumination. He heard Joan's hand on the hood of the car, heard her grunt as her high heels fought the springy turf. Then she was beside him. "We'll be run over," she said.

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He did not reply, but walked diagonally across the highway, chasing the broad oval of light. She clacked across the asphalt after him. They stood about ten feet away from the sign, Hal in front, Joan behind and to his left. "Ready?" Hal asked.

"Oh, go ahead."

His flashlight found the yellow diamond, made a pale bull's-eye around the flat black letters.

OWLS.

"Now can we go?" she asked from behind him, her voice tired but edged with a smug tone of victory.

"It's not supposed to say that." His face felt hot, his throat tight. "Kids put tape on or something." He stalked to the sign, thrust his palm against the cool metal, and swept his hand across the letters. They were not made of tape, but seemed to be the real item, properly black-painted by the Department of Transportation. "This can't be right," Hal said.

Joan made a squeak that he interpreted as laughter.

"This is wrong, and I'm not making any phone call. I don't care what —"

Something thudded to the pavement ahead of them. He swept the light down the asphalt, its beam growing as it fled from him. It passed something black, came back, and shone on a black patent-leather high-heeled shoe. Hal turned. "Did you throw that at me?"

Joan was no longer behind him. He flashed the light toward the car across the highway. It was red and empty.

"Where are you?" he shouted. "Damn it —"

He thought for a second he was having a heart attack. That's how they said it felt: knife-sharp pain gripping the shoulders, a sensation of floating. Then he realized he *was* floating. Thin tree branches flailed him, fell away. Hot blood oozed over the skin inside his coat and shirt, flowed in rivulets down his back and chest. He wheezed for breath. Wildly, he tried to turn the light upward, to see what had him, to glimpse the talons that had seized him, but the back of his head was wedged against a feathered keel as tough and flexible as spring steel.

He felt muscles working above him, felt rhythmic gusts of wind, like air displaced by great, silent wings. The flashlight dropped from his numbing right hand. Head pressed forward, eyes wide, he saw the white spark spin past his dangling feet, farther, falling down through the night to the vanishing earth below.

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Inside Science Fiction

BY CHARLES PLATT

ACKERMANIA

THEY CALLED it "The Auction of the Century," and advertised it in *Omni* and *The New York Times*. Actually, it was the garage sale of the century, and the garage belonged to Forrest Ackerman.

Ackerman is a collector who has never known when to stop. He's spent sixty-two years accumulating books, magazines, comic books, movie posters, stills, costumes, Buck Rogers zap-guns, latex monster-masks, severed heads, bleeding eyeballs, decaying chunks of artificial flesh . . . 300,000 items altogether, filling his eighteen room home and, yes, overflowing into his three-car garage.

Now, in New York City, a firm of enterprising auctioneers was selling off some of the garage-surplus material, plus a few other items of science-fictional interest. The result: a four-day feeding frenzy for collectors, which climaxed with the sale of the original screenplay of *The Wizard of Oz* for $36,000.

* * *

I first met Forrest Ackerman (or "4E," as he calls himself) in 1969, when I visited Los Angeles and shyly asked to see his legendary "Ackermansion." He had no idea who I was, but welcomed me genially and provided a detailed tour of the house. He explained how he had invented the term "sci-fi" ("It suddenly came to me: hi-fi, sci-fi!") and invited me out for a meal at a local self-service cafeteria, which he drove to in his powder-blue Cadillac. (I remember he especially enjoyed demonstrating its electronic door locks.)

The quantity of his collection was impressive; he even had comic books stashed inside his icebox. But the quality of it was, well, a bit sleazy. Somewhere among all the books he probably owned first editions by H.G. Wells; but seemed far more interested in 1930s exploitation movies and trashy "scientifiction" magazines. Ghoulish items pleased him most of all; he revelled in them like a mutant kid with a pile of poisoned Halloween candy.

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The New York auction was scheduled to take place at The Puck Building, mainly known for chic parties attracting fashion models, Soho artists, and TV celebrities. It seemed an unlikely place to sell comic books and movie memorabilia, so I went to check it out.

The first two days were previews: anyone could walk in and inspect the merchandise. One large space was filled with old movie posters—a garish montage of mad scientists, fire-breathing lizards, ominous silver machines emitting death rays, heros killing giant ants with swords, big-breasted women drowning in pits of slime .... To put it bluntly, here, in one room, were all the stupid ideas that ever gave science fiction a bad name. The monstrous faces leered down, larger than life, like freaks in a carnival midway, while collectors evaluated them with the fussiness of museum curators, checking for creases, tears, and other imperfections.

Adjacent to the posters I found items that the catalogue listed as "artifacts." Here was the head of Mr. Sta-Puft, the marshmallow monster in *Ghostbusters*, enshrined in a glass display case. Close by, I found two decaying "Spock Ears," once worn by Leonard Nimoy, now sealed in a sandwich bag. In another glass case was a miniature mechanical hand from *King Kong*; all of its fur had long since fallen off, leaving nothing but some tarnished aluminum rods.

These "artifacts" looked to me like relics culled by some maniac bag lady who had spent a lifetime raiding dumpsters outside movie lots. They took the whole concept of collectibility beyond all normal bounds. To the outsider, they literally looked like rubbish.

But this auction wasn't for outsiders (or *mundanes*, as Ackerman called them). This was for a select subculture of movie freaks and magazine buffs suffering from what I can only describe as Ackermania: the obsessional desire to collect *anything* involving monstrosity, mutilation, and the macabre.

I FOUND FORREST Ackerman sitting at one side of the display space, behind a table whose wood-grain Formica was chipped at the edges and spotted with bits of old masking tape. He wore two "I Love Sci-Fi" buttons pinned to the lapels of his plain brown suit, and beamed genially at everyone who wandered by. Although over seventy, he had the rounded cheeks and pink, unlined skin of a man in his middle fifties. He posed for flash photographs with unpretentious pleasure, as if his celebrity status was still a novelty to him. He was happy, also, to show off his Bela Lugosi Dracula signet ring,

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and to describe the history of any item in his collection, no matter how many times he might have talked about it before.

I asked him why he had decided to have the auction.

"Well, now that I'm seventy-one, I'm really not making any money. When the auctioneers came to me, I decided to empty out my three garages of duplicate material. I mean, if I have six autographed photographs of Karloff, I should be able to live with five. So, the thousand items that you see here are just the tip of the iceberg."

This seemed to be a polite way of saying he was getting rid of some oddments that he didn't really want—one-third of one percent of his total inventory, to be precise. What about the rest of it?

"We would like to move into a smaller home and turn the collection over to mundane people. There've been all kinds of plans and offers: space on the Queen Mary, a museum in Monterey, the city of Chicago. The Disney studio kept saying they were interested, but none of it has come to anything.

"I've lived with my collection now for sixty-two years. I'd like to see it preserved, but I don't know, if this auction is a success, I may finally give it all up."

I walked into the next room, where I found a gallery of original artwork by Frank Frazetta, Boris Vallejo, Carl Lundgren, Tim Hildebrandt, and others. These paintings did not belong to Ackerman; most had been commissioned originally as book covers, and had been added to the auction by the artists. And here, standing in front of "The Barbarian"—the famous painting that once graced the cover of *Conan the Adventurer* and inspired a thousand imitations—was Frank Frazetta himself.

He turned out to be an earthy, matter-of-fact, plain-spoken man. I could have mistaken him for an electrician or maintenance engineer. At the same time, he had no false modesty about his work: "This one painting," he told me, "has revolutionized the industry. It made the Robert E. Howard estate millions. See, when I'm at my best, I produce masterpieces. But of course, no one hits a home run every time. Sometimes, when I'm tired or I'm just not working right, I produce stuff that's junk."

I asked him if he had been an avid reader of science fiction or fantasy before he started working in this genre.

"No, never. Of course, I was a comic-book artist, originally. What I really like to paint is anything feline; beast-women; creatures of the wild. The heroic figure isn't really my bag, oddly enough. But I found myself enjoying fantasy art because you

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have so much freedom."

I asked him what he's been working on recently.

"I was lazy-assed for years, resting on my laurels in the early 1980s. I've done some paintings for myself, some stuff that's almost too naughty to be printed. Some of it's in the Frazetta museum, in East Stroudsburg. Right now I'm doing six paintings featuring a character I call the Death Dealer, for a series of books by James Silke. They'll be published by Tor."

After two days of previews, the auction took place in an adjacent ballroom where the decor was Renovated Industrial Chic: refinished hardwood floors, cast-iron pillars painted white, with spotlights angled at the white vaulted ceiling. An audience of around three hundred sat on white plastic folding chairs, clutching copies of the $18 silver-covered catalogue and free copies of *Omni* magazine. Sandwiches were available from a table in one corner, to sustain us through the ten hours of bidding that lay ahead.

I found a seat beside a young man who was studying his catalogue with singleminded intensity. He had already made his first purchase: two carved objects that looked like dark-brown fortune cookies. I asked him what they were.

"Abraham Lincoln's chin, and the pouch from under one of his eyes. They were in an episode of *Star Trek*. Here, you can touch them. Go ahead!"

I picked them up. The felt squishy, like Dr. Scholl foot pads.

"I got a real good price on them," he told me. "Forty-five bucks."

Other "artifacts" were soon selling for much more. Someone bid $13,000 for a gold-painted wooden bicycle from an obscure George Melies science-fiction movie. King Kong's hairless hand went for $1,400. Mr. Sta-Puft fetched $375. Even Spock's ears, in their sandwich bag, drew $425.

Written material was less in demand. Many short-story manuscripts went for minimum bids of $25, even though they were by authors as well-known as Isaac Asimov. Other manuscripts attracted no bids at all. Ray Bradbury's *Long After Midnight*, which eventually became *Fahrenheit 451*, was the big exception: it sold for $17,000, even though there were some pages missing.

Original cover art from magazines of the 1930s was popular, selling for $1,000 to $2,000, and most of the originals by Boris Vallejo made $2,000 to $5,000. The real excitement, however, centered around Frazetta's "Barbarian" painting.

"We will accept opening bids of $100,000 for this work," the auctioneer announced. She was greeted with

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stunned silence; and then, people started laughing.

Well, would anyone offer $50,000 for "The Barbarian"? Or how about $25,000? Finally, someone raised his hand. From there, offers climbed gradually to $42,500, where they stopped. "Don't get excited," she told the winning bidder. "We haven't sold it to you yet."

Frank Frazetta had gone back home to East Stroudsburg, but was listening in on the auction by telephone. He promptly rejected $42,500 as being beneath his dignity. The audience booed. What they didn't realize was that Frazetta's confidential reserve price on "The Barbarian" had been two million dollars.

Frazetta also rejected $5,000 a piece for pencil sketches he had drawn for the animated movie *Fire and Ice*; but he did reconcile himself to $11,000 for a minor painting that he had done to advertise *Foloni*, an obscure 1985 science-fiction movie.

Many people in the audience were dealers, but the ones I spoke to said they were buying items for themselves, not for resale. I wondered what obscure desires drove them to spend thousands of dollars on disintegrating foam-rubber masks and commercial art depicting blood-spattered corpses. Clearly, these buyers had been infected with Ackermania. But how had it happened? And why?

* * *

MOST SMALL boys enjoy collecting things, and I was no exception. When I was eleven, I started a stamp collection. I spent most of my allowance on it and was proud of it—until I saw what a *real* stamp collection looked like. At that point, I decided to collect car license plate numbers instead. Even then, I found other kids who had been working at it longer than I had and were way ahead of me.

The message was clear: to own a collection that would be the best of its kind, I have to find something that no one else had ever thought of collecting. For weeks, I pondered the possibilities. Finally, I found the answer: toothpaste caps of every brand and size. This is true; it happened. During that period, I can confidently claim to have owned the largest collection of toothpaste caps in the world. I was, in fact, the Forrest Ackerman of capdom.

But uniqueness, alone, is not enough. A true collector needs that smug sense of importance that comes from owning a hoard that other people envy.

Ackerman himself lacked this payoff when he first started collecting movie memorabilia. No one, back then, thought it was worth anything. when he wanted the complete monster suit from *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, for example, he waited

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till the movie finished shooting, then bought the suit from a janitor for ten dollars.

But then he started editing *Famous Monsters of Filmland.* This was his stroke of genius. Issue after issue was packed with pictures of his memorabilia. It seduced thousands of pimply teenagers (myself, yes, among them) into sharing his wonderful delusion: that costume and gimmicks from trashy B-movies were priceless relics, to be handled with awe and preserved for posterity.

Alas, I never persuaded anyone that toothpaste caps were valuable. This is why I long since lost interest in my collection and threw it away, while Forrest Ackerman's is now worth a small fortune.

Maybe if I'd had the savvy to start a magazine called *Famous Caps of Pasteland,* things would have worked out differently.

"Clear your mind at two o'clock this afternoon. I'm going to send you a top of the gossip newsbreak from the bridge-lunch via mental telepathy."

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Andrew Klavan's short writing career has been a distinguished one. His first novel, FACE OF THE EARTH, (1980) was published by Viking, and his short story, "The Devil Dogs," received the Andrew Fels Award from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines. In 1984 he won an Edgar Award for a pseudononymous mystery novel ("soon to be a minor motion picture"). Mr. Klavan has been a newspaperman and is currently a freelance newswriter for a New York radio station.

The Woman in the Wood

By Andrew Klavan

I

HE ROSE FROM among the bodies on the field:
A shadow hulking against the purple sky,
his feet obscured in the underthicket of carnage.
In one turn, he took in everything,
from where the fortress snickered and glowed
in the east to where, in the west,
the smoke curled upward toward
the sinking moon.

A whole civilization had fallen:
He knew this as he lumbered through the dead —
and that what had been a race was now
a thousand tribes, and what had been
a parliament was now a destiny
of internecine feuds, and what had been
a vision was incestuous totems,
facing away — and that his work was over.

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* * *

He felt he was the lives that had
pulsed into him along his sword,
and now, stepping free of the mud and the armies,
he didn't know how he would carry his emptiness.

Before him lay the last of the night,
and then, over a rise, like night itself,
a wood against the western stars.
And — just where the trees began — there stood
a charger, silver-saddled and still.
The horse seemed transfixed by the gray line
of dawn. The man approached him,
and he rounded slowly and glowered at the man.
But the man came on, until the horse bowed down
his head; and the man mounted,
and they turned and rode away.

II

They followed the moon into the forest,
and the dull light rose, and then
the day was around them everywhere:
the cloud mass rolling over
like a waterwheel, until it broke on blue;
pockets of birdchatter opening, and birds;
swooping out of them from tree to tree;
wind whispers; rill songs . . . and it cheered him — morning —
even with the world in ashes.

He knew there was a convent nearby
where he could get food and shelter.
He rode until he recognized
a clearing ringed with oaks and pines.
He nudged the charger into it —
and the horse stopped short;
and the man reared up in the saddle.

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* * *

There was a woman lying on the leaves
and dead needles, in a space
where light tumbled in beams from the pine tops
to encircle her. She was dressed
in a peasant's robe, once white,
now stained with brown and green. And he thought:
She must be running to the nunnery from
a torched village — or from everything.

He was stirred, watching her.
His clothes were still reeking
the stink of the wreckage,
but still he was stirred watching her
long, light hair lie softly on
her face; the robe above her breasts
take the shape of her breast as she breathed,
then waft to the line of her belly
so that her hips and thighs and the nest of hair
between her thighs were traced upon the cloth.
He dismounted and stood staring at her.
She shifted, rustling the leaves.
And when she saw him there, she did not start,
but opened her eyes in a slow amazement
of pleasure. She murmured. "There you are."
And when he stood there, staring: "I foretold you.
Why should God, I asked them, count the gift
of my virginity more cheaply than His mother's?"
He trudged through that awhile until
he was astonished by his luck — then said:
"Thus God confounds the wise of this world
and makes fools wise" — the only bit
of Scripture that he knew — and knelt beside her.
He didn't say much else;
and though she babbled a little —
perhaps to maintain her delusion
against the smell of him —

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he kissed her quiet soon.
He reached beneath her robe and stroked
her breasts, her waist. He felt the entry to her
give before his fingers and his lips
and, finally, rend and open
to his erection. She gave a moan of pain,
which thrilled him; then her mouth became
a circle of surprise, which made him laugh;
then she cried out in climax, and he loved her,
and caressed her face and wanted to know all of her,
thinking: It might have been any woman,
but it was she.
His semen pulsed from him along his cock
and into her, and she was quickened, and he fell
atop her. He did feel godlike.
and she did not seem sorry
he'd turned out to be a man.
They agreed to go on together.

III

They rode for several days; ate what he killed
or what she gathered; made love
and slept in one another's arms.
He told her stories about the wars
and listened to her wonder
at the wrath of God, and the love of God,
which she'd gone to find in the forest.
He loved morning and the feel of her thigh
in his hand; and his hazes of melancholy
came and passed. But when, one night,
as she lay sleeping on his chest and he lay
staring at the stars above a field,
he heard a noise in the surrounding hedge —
his hand convulsed upon the hilt of his sword,
and he slid from underneath her,
and he thought: It was overdue.

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The thieves — two of them — rushed from the hedge
with shouts and daggers. He roared and rolled
and rose and swung his sword
and cut one robber to the ground.
But the other was on him, and the knife
slid deep into his side before
he spun and caught the assailant's throat
with the edge of his blade.
Then night birds were singing,
and then he stood alone; breathing — bleeding.
He saw her cowering in the grass, and said:
"It's all right now." And toppled over.

IV

He came around and found her with him;
he slept again and woke, and she was there,
tending to him, murmuring like water
and with cool hands. But his gaze was a fatal gaze.
He thought constantly of the attack.
He brooded on the penetration of the blade
into his flesh, and it began to seem to him
it would not have happened
if he had still been in the habit of killing;
if he had not been at ease; in love.
If not for her.

If not for her: He now saw hints
of malice in her eyes. She smiled,
and he thought she was laughing; she cooed to him,
"There, love," and he thought she was being
tender toward the gash as if it were her child.
He remembered how they'd met — chancy, strange —
and he began to wonder: Was it demonry?
Perhaps he wasn't meant to survive
the battle, and maybe she was
his Evil Fate: his Death arrived, beautiful,

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having missed him on the field.
Soon he was convinced of it — and then he was not.
She'd touch him, and he'd knock her hand away,
then reach for her and hold her while she cried.
It became a kind of madness of conviction;
miserable: hanging proof on a gesture
disproved by the next until,
once as he watched her praying for him
against the dawn, he decided on a test.

V

He knew a meadow where there was a cave.
When he was strong enough to ride, he brought her there
as the day was ending: a rock at the center
of a gray expanse of weeds and dying grass;
an entry that the wind roared round;
a door into black stone. He set her down.
He said: "Go in and wait for me."
She hesitated, arms across herself and shivering.
She said: "Love, I don't like it here." But he said nothing,
and she edged in slowly — and she slowly vanished in the dark.

Now the serpent of the place was a thing of fire.
He thought: If she subdues it, I will cut her down.
But if she screams like a natural woman,
I'll kill her the beast.
He rode away for her to hear, and left his charger
grazing. He returned on foot and hovered,
listening, at the mouth of the cave.
From deep within, he heard her sing
what seemed to him a specter's song; then a song
against her terror. Then a silence. Then she screamed.

There was a thin instant of running and noise,
and the shadows of flame on the cave's far corners,
before he was in the midst of it,

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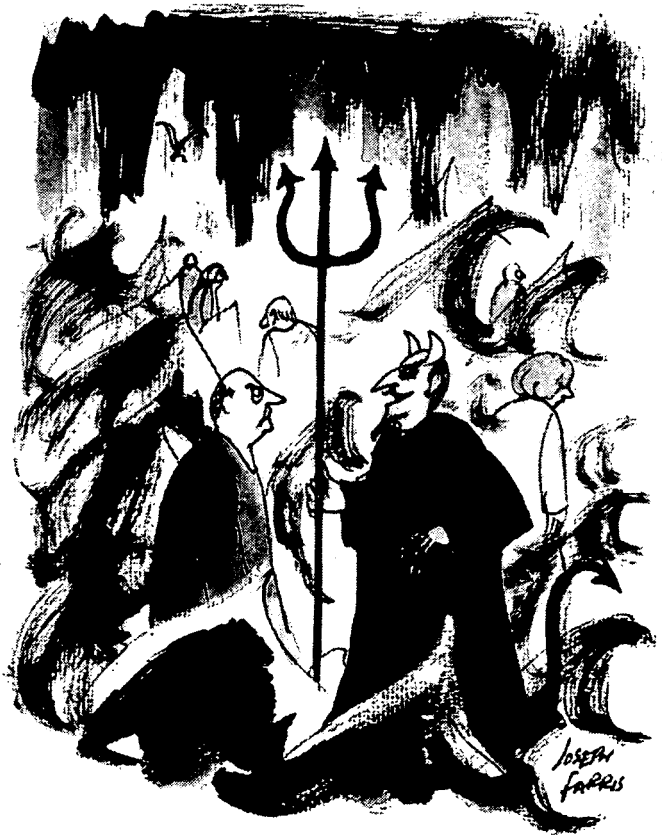
hacking and gored and blind with fire.
Finally, he saw the monster fall,
but he himself was dying.
The woman knelt in blood. She held him on her knees.
She wept without speaking. He could not speak
or weep — could only watch
the dusk dissolving, and see her face.
And then there were no more warriors.



"There's no use calling your lawyer. He's here too."

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Chet Williamson returns with a story about a teacher who does not believe in dreams or fantasies but who reluctantly agrees to play in one for her class, only to find that this fantasy has quite literally wrapped its arms around her. . . .

Miss Tuck and the Gingerbread Boy

By Chet Williamson

MISS TUCK FROWNED as she picked up the small balls and noodles of Play-Doh from under the chairs. She frowned as she tossed the wet paper towels into the dark green metal waste can, and put the milk carton back into the small refrigerator with the animal magnets all over it. She frowned at the thought of Don, her aide, home sick with a cold. And she frowned at Bobby Sullivan, sitting quietly in the corner.

"Did your mother say how late she was going to be?"

"No, Miss Tuck."

"Hmph." What did Linda Sullivan think she was, a baby-sitter? Eleven forty-five. The children were supposed to be picked up at 11:45 at the *latest*, and it was now 11:53. She'd barely have time enough to go down the block to the luncheonette in the drugstore for her usual soup and sandwich and get back in time to prepare for the 1:00 invasion.

Miss Tuck was straightening the final chair, frowning at it for being

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out of alignment, when Jenny Pierce came into the room. "Dotty," she said, "do you have the Nutshell Library over here? I want to use it this after —Oh, hi, Bobby."

The boy tentatively returned her smile. "Hi, ma'am."

"Bobby's mother's late," Miss Tuck said. "The Nutshell books are in the corner." Her voice was brusque, but only a bit. Jenny Pierce was second in command to Marti Donohue, who ran the nursery school like a benevolent despot. It wouldn't do to offend either of them.

A knock on the door made them both turn, and Linda Sullivan, looking younger than any mother of a four-year-old had a right to do, appeared in the doorway. "Hi, sweetie," she said to her son, who ran to meet her. "Hello, Jenny, Miss Tuck. Sorry I'm late."

"It was no problem," Miss Tuck said. "Bobby's never any trouble." Although her stiff smile belied the words, Linda Sullivan seemed not to notice. She bundled up her son and left with a friendly wave. Miss Tuck was putting on her own coat, when Jenny Pierce asked her about the gingerbread boy.

"I didn't think I would." Miss Tuck replied.

"Oh Dotty...." Jenny Pierce sounded genuinely pained. "We *always* do it for the four-year-olds. Every classroom. They love it so."

"Is it so much a tradition?" Miss Tuck asked through pinched lips.

Jenny Pierce nodded, and Miss Tuck frowned again. The gingerbread boy. Surely one of the most idiotic of the *many* idiotic tales for children — a baked gingerbread boy jumping out of the oven, running all over the place, spouting that inane, "You can't catch *me*, I'm the *gingerbread* boy!", before finally being devoured by a clever fox. Just one more directionless fantasy. "What do we have to do?" she asked.

"Oh, it's fun," Jenny Pierce grinned. "Tonight you make two big gingerbread boys, big enough for the whole class, and you cook one of them. Tomorrow you hide the cooked one before school starts, and when the kids come, you let them see you put the uncooked one in the oven. Then you have Don read the story while you sneak into the kitchen and hide the one that's baking so that they can't possibly find it. When it's time to open the oven, surprise, no gingerbread boy, and the kids go through the church looking for him."

"And when they find him, they eat him?" Miss Tuck asked dryly.

"Sure."

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Miss Tuck shook her head. "All right, Jenny, but it seems silly."

It was Jenny Pierce's turn to frown. "Why silly?"

Miss Tuck sighed. "Kid's get so *much* fantasy. Talking animals, fairies, elves, dragons . . . it seems that's all we give them. And now a gingerbread boy that jumps out of the oven. I mean, stories are one thing, but to pretend that gingerbread really comes to life is another."

"Oh Dotty, the kids don't really believe it."

"I don't know. They're not all mature enough to differentiate between what's real and what isn't. I bet that at least some of them will believe it's real. Just like they believe in Santa Claus."

"And what's so bad about believing in Santa Claus?"

"When children believe in things that aren't true, sooner or later they're going to be disappointed, going to be hurt."

"But that's part of growing up. Those are small hurts, Dotty, and when they're over, the child is older, and he knows it and feels good about leaving behind those silly beliefs. They have to face reality soon enough. Why not let them hold on to their fantasies for a while?" Jenny Pierce smiled. "Besides, if they believe enough, who knows but that they might come true?"

Miss Tuck had no answer for Jenny Pierce that morning, but that night, with two vodka and tonics inside her, she wished Jenny Pierce was there, so that she could tell her about what fantasies could do. Jenny didn't *have* to have fantasies, did she? She had it all — a husband, a child, a career — you don't *need* fantasies when you live them, do you?

Miss Tuck added more flour to the dough, and took another sip of her drink, leaving wide, white finger marks on the sweating glass. She went back to kneading the dough, thinking how stupid it all was, remembering the fantasies *she* had had. Not about Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, but more recent fantasies, a fantasy of fifteen years before, when she imagined that Tom would come back from Vietnam and marry her. My, how she believed that one, looking at the ring with the tiny, tiny diamond bigger than the Ritz. He came back, all right, only in a bag.

Miss Tuck pounded the dough a final time, and reached for the cookie cutter Jenny Pierce had lent her. It was in the shape of a gingerbread boy, though one could have imagined it a snowman or a farmer or anything remotely humanoid. "It's the extras that'll make it cute," Jenny had said. "Raisin eyes, cherry nose, maybe an orange slice for a mouth, but-

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tons, a little tie — use your imagination."

She pressed the cutter into the sheet of dough twice, lifted it, and cleared away the rest of the dough, rolling it up into a ball, and tossing it in the sink. There they lay, two foot-long gingerbread boys, each one capable of feeding ten children, who would tear it apart and wolf it down regardless of their belief that it had just been running through the room not a minute before.

It was an unpleasant thought, and Miss Tuck tried to drive it away by thinking what she could do to spark up the pastries, make them more than dull brown doughboys. She took raisins from the refrigerator and positioned them as eyes and buttons, then cut a slice of orange peel for the mouth, but she had no cherries for a nose. She tried a raisin, but it looked too much like the eyes. "Come on, Dotty," she said to herself. "Use your *imagination. Fantasize.*"

Sure, she thought, fantasize. Just like you fantasized that of all those men you met, one of them, just *one*, would want to stay with you when they woke up in the morning, that just *one* would be like Tom.

"Don't tell *me*, Jenny Pierce," she said aloud. "Don't tell *me* that fantasies might come true; don't tell *me* that dreams don't hurt."

There was nothing that hurt more, and she growled as she pressed a yellow M & M in the center of each pliant face, right above the orange-slice mouth.

This year she would do it, play the gingerbread game, because she had said she would. But not *next* year, oh no.

She was through with fantasy.

The next morning, however, when she wrapped the gingerbread boys, she had to admit that the cooked one looked quite handsome, and she stopped at the store for licorice whips to make a small string tie for each, feeling irritated at herself for doing so. *It's for the children,* she told herself. *If I'm to do it, I may as well do it right.*

She got to the church a half hour before the children were due to arrive, and began to look for a hiding place. After some consideration she decided on one of the closets in the Fellowship Hall, a large meeting room downstairs with a small stage, institutionally green walls, and unused shuffleboard tiles in the floor. Two of the three closets were filled with the leavings of the Cub Scout pack that met there every week, but the third closet, back behind the faded red curtains of the stage, was empty of

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everything but a broom, a mop, and two buckets. It was the perfect place.

She first put wax paper over the floor, then set the gingerbread boy down carefully on top of it. For a moment she wondered if the church had mice, but decided it was unlikely since Jenny Pierce hadn't cautioned her about it. She left the door ajar and went up to her room.

Don, her aide, was getting the room ready, and he smiled as she came in. "Feeling better?" she asked.

He was, and except for her directions and his questions as to what the morning would hold, there was no further conversation between them. It was a polite silence, born of mutual disinterest rather than dislike. The children started to come in at ten minutes before nine, hanging their coats on the proper hooks, and playing quietly with the toys Don had set out for them.

The morning went smoothly, and at ten o'clock, Miss Tuck told the children that she had a surprise for them. Taking a tea towel off the plate that bore the unbaked gingerbread boy, Miss Tuck revealed it to the children, who ooohed and aaahed in excited anticipation, as if older brothers and sisters had told them about the tradition.

"All right, children, let's take the gingerbread boy into the kitchen. . . . Billy, would you like to carry it? Be careful, don't drop it. Now, I'll turn up the oven . . . there we are . . . and who'd like to put him inside? Judy? That's right. Right on there. Don't worry, it's not hot yet. All right, now let's go back into the room, and Mr. Reger will read a story to you about a gingerbread boy very much like this one, and the adventures he had. And while he does that, I'm going to pop in and out of the kitchen to make sure *our* gingerbread boy is baking just right. O.K.?"

The children sat on the floor in a circle around Don, who began to read the story. Miss Tuck sat apart, lost in her own thoughts as the tale wound on, but still listening with half an ear so that she would know when to go into the kitchen, play Jenny Pierce's stupid game, lie to the children, pretend that flour and shortening and ginger and sugar had come to life and run away.

"You can't catch *me*, I'm the *gingerbread* boy!"

Don seemed into it, she thought sourly. Probably used to reading that kind of stuff to his own kids. She listened to the story for a moment.

"'And there before him sat a lean and lazy fox, licking a front paw and looking at the gingerbread boy with his head cocked to one side.'"

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The fox. That meant the story would be over soon. Time to hide the gingerbread boy.

The fox. That meant the story would be over soon. Time to hide the gingerbread boy on the top shelf where none of the children would see it, then take them out to the kitchen for the discovery. She thought Tricia Malone should be the one to open the oven and discover it was missing; she was the most excitable.

As Miss Tuck rose from her chair, she heard a harsh squeal of metal on metal, as though the oven door had been opened. Jenny Pierce, no doubt, putting *her* gingerbread boy in for *her* class. But a second later, when Miss Tuck opened the door to the kitchen, she saw no Jenny Pierce, no other four-year-old class, only the open oven door, and the empty oven. A soft pattering sounded somewhere nearby, and a moment later a startled cry of excitement came from her room. Confused, she turned and went back to the children, who were standing now, smiles of thrilled amazement on their faces.

"He ran out there!" Tricia Malone cried.

"In the hall! In the hall!" added Bobby Sullivan.

Miss Tuck looked at Don for an explanation, but he was staring in fascination at the door to the hall. "Who ran out?" barked Miss Tuck. "Who are you talking about?" She did a quick count — all the children were there.

"The gingerbread boy! The gingerbread boy!" answered the high little voices in unison.

"We *saw* 'im!" cried Charlie Hockelman, grinning widely.

"Saw . . . Don, what's going on here?" Miss Tuck was frowning again. A tornado would have looked friendlier.

"I . . . I don't know," said Don, shaking his head. "*I* didn't see anything, but I *heard* . . . something."

"It was *real*!" crooned a wide-eyed Judy Manning. "It was really *real*!"

Miss Tuck didn't know whom to be angry at first — Jenny Pierce (or whoever it was who had played this childish joke); Don, for going along with it; or the children, for believing in the reality of such obvious trickery. "Real!" she boomed out. "All right, I'll show you what's real!" And she stormed out the door and down the hall.

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She'd show them, all right; she'd march right downstairs to the closet in the Fellowship Hall, take that gingerbread boy she'd put there, and tell the *truth* to all of them. She couldn't *believe* that anyone had had the effrontery to interfere with her class — *her class* — and had tried to make her look like a *fool* in the bargain. *We'll just see who looks foolish now!* she thought furiously, rounding a corner of the hall.

Miss Tuck didn't notice the crumbs until she started down the stairs. When she saw them, she stopped and looked behind her. They were there, too, all the way back to the corner she'd come around, and probably before that as well — red-brown crumbs nearly as fine as powder, in an unbroken trail that coincided with the route she'd taken.

So, into the basement, too, eh! She frowned even more deeply, taking the stairs two at a time. Instead of turning off into any one of half a dozen short halls that honeycombed the basement, the trail of crumbs led her to the Fellowship Hall, and it was not until she opened the door to the large, shuffleboard-floored room that she began to be surprised at the coincidence that the prankster should be heading straight for the room where she'd hidden the second gingerbread boy. She stopped in the doorway, fully expecting to confront the culprit, but the room was empty. She listened, and heard what she thought were light footfalls, but saw nothing except the trail of rusty crumbs that led up the side of the room, up the stairs to the small stage, and disappeared behind the curtains.

"All right!" she said, steel in her tone. "The joke's *over!*"

There was no answer at first, only silence, but Miss Tuck fancied she heard a small giggle that sounded almost *crisp* in the big, empty room, followed by more light footfalls across the hollow boards of the stage.

A child? It must be, she thought bitterly. No one from *her* class; they had all been there. Some brat from Jenny Pierce's room, no doubt. *Relax, Dotty, relax, watch that temper, don't get mad,* she told herself as she followed the path of crumbs toward the stage. But it was no use. She wanted to wrench the child's arm out of its socket, smack his bottom until he screamed for mercy, drag him before her class, saying, *here, here's your gingerbread boy!* That last she *would* do, that at least.

It was almost too easy. The trail led directly up the stairs, behind the curtain, across the dark backstage area, and right to the closet where she'd hidden the other gingerbread boy. And Miss Tuck stopped dead in front of the closed closet door, stopped and thought, *How did he know where I*

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JOEL ROSENBERG

NOT FOR GLORY

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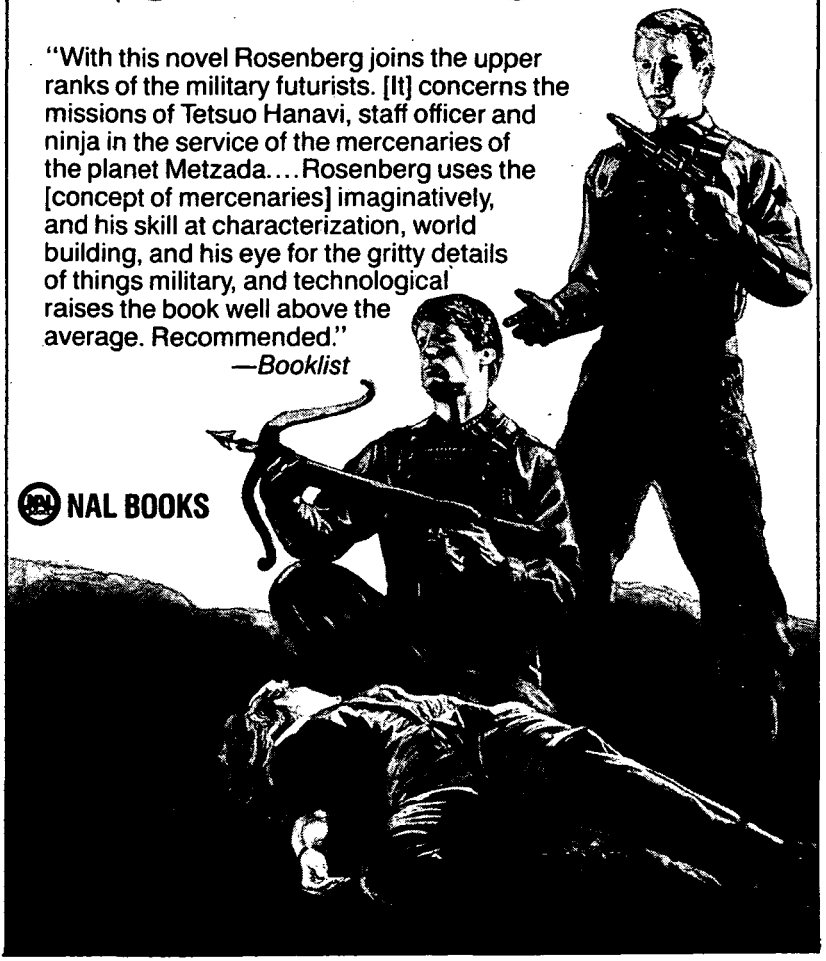

NAL BOOKS

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hid it! She had told no one, and no one had seen her, or been with her.

No one but the other, unbaked, gingerbread boy.

There was no time for further thought or concern, for now a low laugh sounded from inside the closet, enraging Miss Tuck with its implied mockery. Savagely, she grabbed the knob and threw the door open.

It was on her so quickly she barely glimpsed it towering above her before it enveloped her in its warm sponginess, the fat, doughy arms wrapping about her, drawing her face against its chest, filling her nostrils with the sweet-spicy scent of ginger. It was a boy no longer, but a gingerbread man, holding her like a smothering lover, lowering its bald, round head toward hers so that, as with her last bit of strength she pulled up her own head, she could see the raisin eyes gleaming wetly with life, the orange-slice mouth split in a senseless grin. She was barely able to draw in a breath for a scream, when it embraced her again, forcing her eyes, nose, and mouth against its moist, suffocating softness.

"Children," said Miss Tuck, her smiling face framed in the door. "I'm afraid that gingerbread boy's been leading me on quite a chase. I'm going to need your help. Let's see if we can find him."

The children, delighted at the prospect of the hunt, leaped from their seats and streamed into the hall, searching for the elusive pastry. Miss Tuck smiled at Don, who looked at her with a puzzled expression. "Come on, Don," she said with a wink. "He'll get away sure if we don't hurry." And she turned and ran down the hall with the children.

No matter how hard they looked, they were unable to find the gingerbread boy. They were disappointed, but Miss Tuck only laughed. "He escaped, children!" she cried gleefully. "And isn't that the best thing that could have happened? He got away. He's free now, free and happy. Oh, I know you all wanted gingerbread, but I have a surprise that's even better." And she took them down the street to the drugstore luncheonette, where they filled all the stools at the counter and ordered whatever they wanted — sundaes, shakes, or fudgeboats — while Miss Tuck paid the check. Then they walked back to the church, the children fighting for the privilege of walking next to Miss Tuck and holding her hand.

"I like her," Tricia Malone confided to Judy Manning, " 'cause she smells nice."

(to page 141)

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In this story, Paul Di Filippo ("Conspiracy of Noise" November 1987) demonstrates for us a future in which appreciation of art is, indeed, "in the eyes of the beholder. . . ."

A Short Course in Art Appreciation

By Paul Di Filippo

WE WERE SO happy, Elena and I, in the Vermeer perceptiverse. Our days and nights were filled with visual epiphanies that seemed to ignite the rest of our senses, producing a conflagration of desire that burned higher and higher, until it finally subsided to the embers of satiation, from which the whole inferno, phoenixlike, could be rekindled at will. There had never been a time when we were so thrilled with life, so enamored of the world and each other — so much in love.

Yet somehow, I knew from the start that our idyll was doomed to end. Such bliss was not for us, could never last. I don't know what it was that implanted such a subliminal worm of doubt in my mind, with its tiny, whispering voice that spoke continually of transience and loss and exhaustion. Perhaps it was the memory of the sheer avidity and almost obscene yearning greed with which Elena had first approached me with the idea of altering our natural perceptiverses.

She entered my apartment that spring day (we were not yet living to-

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gether then, a symbol, I believe, of our separate identities that irrationally irked her), in a mood like none I had ever witnessed her exhibit. (I try now to picture her unaltered face, as I observed it on that fateful day, but it is so hard, after the dizzying cascade of perceptiverses we have experienced, to clearly visualize anything from that long-ago time. How can I have totally forgotten the mode of seeing that was as natural as breathing to me for thirty-some-odd years? It is as if the natural perceptiverse I was born into is a painting that lies layers deep, below several others, and whose lines can be only imperfectly traced. You will understand, then, if I cannot re-create the scene precisely.)

In any case, I remember our conversation from that day perfectly. (Thank God I resisted the temptation to enter one of the composer-perceptiverses, or that memory, too, might be buried, under an avalanche of glorious sound!) I have frequently mentally replayed our words, seeking to learn if there was any way I could have circumvented Elena's unreasoning desires — avoiding both the heaven and hell that lay embryonic in her steely whims — yet still have managed to hold onto her love.

I feel now that, essentially, there was no way. She was simply too strong and determined for me — or perhaps I was too weak — and I could not deny her.

But I still cannot bring myself to blame her.

Crossing the memory-hazed room, Elena said excitedly, "Robert, it's out!"

I laid down my book, making sure to shut it off, and, all unwitting, asked, "Not even a hello or a kiss? It must be something wonderful, then. Well, I'll bite. What's out?"

"Why, just that new neurotropin everyone's been waiting so long for, the one to alter the perceptiverses."

I immediately grew defensive. "Elena, you know I try to steer clear of those designer drugs. They're just not — not natural. I'm not a prig, Elena. I don't mind indulging in a little grass or coke now and then — they're perfectly natural mind-altering substances that mankind's been using for centuries. But these new artificial compounds — they can really screw up your neuropeptides."

Elena grew huffy. "Robert, you're talking nonsense. This isn't one of the regulated substances, you know, like tempo or ziptone. Why, it's not even supposed to be as strong as estheticine. It doesn't get you high or

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alter your thinking at all. It merely gives you a new perceptiverse."

"And what, if I may ask, is a perceptiverse?"

"Oh Robert," Elena sighed in exasperation, "and you call yourself educated! That's just the kind of question I should have expected from someone whose nose is always buried in a book. The perceptiverse is just the universe as filtered through one's perceptions. It's the only universe any of us can know, of course. In fact, it might be the only universe that exists for any of us, if those physicists you're always quoting know what they're talking about."

"Elena, we've had this discussion before. I keep telling you that you can't apply the rules of quantum physics to the macroscopic world. . . ."

"Oh, screw all that anyway! You're just trying to change the subject. Aren't you excited at all?"

"Maybe I would be, if I knew what it was all about. I still don't understand. Is this new drug just another hallucinogen?"

"No, that's just it; it's much more. It alters your visual perceptions in a coherent, consistent manner, without affecting anything else. You don't see anything that's not there; you just see what does exist in a different way. And since sight's our most critical sense, the effect's supposed to be like stepping into another universe."

I considered. "And exactly what kind of universe would one be stepping into?"

Elena fell into my lap with a delighted squeal, as if she had won the battle. "Oh Robert, that's just it! It's not *what* universe, it's *whose!*"

"Whose?"

"Yes, whose! The psychoengineers claim they've distilled the essence of artistic vision."

I suppose I should interject here that Elena was a student of art history. In our bountiful world, where the Net cradled one from birth to death, she was free to spend all her time doing what she enjoyed, which happened to be wandering for hours through museums, galleries, and studios, with me in tow.

"You're saying," I slowly went on, "that this magical pill lets you see like, say, Rembrandt?"

"No," frowned Elena, "not exactly. After all, Rembrandt, to use your example, probably didn't literally see much differently than any of us. That's a fallacy nonartists always fall for. The magic was in how he trans-

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muted his everyday vision, capturing it in the medium of his art. I doubt if any artist, except perhaps those like Van Gogh, who are close to madness, can maintain their unique perspective every minute of their waking hours. No, what the psychoengineers have done is to formalize the stylistic elements of particular artists — more or less the idiosyncratic rules that govern light and shape and texture in an individual perceptiverse — and make them reproducible. By taking this new neurotropin, we'll be enabled to see not *like* Rambrandt, but as if *inhabiting* Rembrandt's canvases!"

"I find that hard to believe. . . ."

"It's true, Robert; it's true! The volunteers all report the most marvelous results!"

"But Elena, would you really want to inhabit a Rembrandt world all day . . . ?"

"Of course! Look around you! All these dull plastics and synthetics! Who wouldn't want to! And anyway, it's not Rembrandt they've chosen for the first release. It's Vermeer."

"Vermeer or Rembrandt, Elena, I just don't know if. . . ."

"Robert, you haven't even considered the most important aspect of all this. We'd be doing it together! For the first time in history, two people can be sure they're sharing the same perceptiverse. Our visual perceptions would be absolutely synchronized. I'd never have to wonder if you really understood what I was seeing, nor you me. We'd be totally at one. Just think what it would mean for our love!"

Her face — that visage I can no longer fully summon up without a patina of painterly interpretation — was glowing. I couldn't hold out against her.

"All right," I said. "If it means so much to you. . . ."

She tossed her arms around my neck and hugged me close. "Oh Robert, I knew you'd come around! This is wonderful!" She released me and stood. "I have the pills right here."

I confess to having felt a little alarm right then. "You bought them already, not knowing if I'd even agree. . . ."

"You're not angry, are you, Robert? It's just that I thought we knew each other so well. . . ." She fingered her little plastic pill case nervously.

"No, I'm not angry; it's just. . . . Oh well, forget it. Let's have the damn pill."

She fetched a single glass of water from the tap and dispensed the

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pills. She swallowed first, then, as if sharing some obscure sacrament, passed me the glass. I downed the pill. It seemed to scorch my throat.

"How long does the effect last?" I asked.

"Why, I thought I made that clear. Until you take another one."

I sat down weakly, Elena resting one haunch on the arm of the chair beside me. We waited for the change, looking curiously around the room.

Subtly at first, then with astonishing force and speed, my perceptiverse — our perceptiverse — began to alter. Initially it was the light pouring in through the curtained windows that began to seem different. It acquired a pristine translucency, tinged with supernal honeyed overtones. This light fell on the wood, the plastic, the fabric in my mundane apartment, utterly transfiguring everything it touched, in what seemed like a chain reaction that raced through the very molecules of my whole perceptiverse.

In minutes the change was complete.

I was inhabiting the Vermeer perceptiverse.

I turned to face Elena.

She looked like the woman in *Young Woman with a Water Jug* at the Met.

I had never seen anything — anyone — so beautiful.

My eyes filled with tears.

I knew Elena was experiencing the same thing as I.

Crying, she said, "Oh Robert, kiss me now."

I did. And then, somehow, we were naked, our oil paint — and brushstroke-mottled bodies shining as if we had stepped tangibly from the canvas, rolling on the carpet, locked in a frantic lovemaking unlike anything I had ever experienced before that moment.

I felt as though I were fucking Art itself.

THUS BEGAN the happiest months of my life.

At first, Elena and I were content merely to stay in the apartment all day, simply staring in amazement at the most commonplace objects, now all transformed into perfect elements in some vast, heretofore-undiscovered masterpiece by Vermeer. Once we had exhausted a particular view, we had only to shift our position to create a completely different composition, which we could study for hours more. To set the table for a meal was to fall enraptured into contemplation of a unique still life each time. The rules of perceptual transformation that

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the psychoengineers had formulated worked perfectly. Substances and scenes that Vermeer could never have imagined acquired the unmistakable touch of his palette and brush.

Tiring even of such blissful inactivity, we would make love with a frenetic reverence approaching satori. Afterward the wrinkles in the sheets reminded us of thick troughs of paint, impasto against our skin.

After a time, of course, this stage passed. Desirous of new vistas, we set out to explore the Vermeer-veneered world.

We were not alone. Thousands shared the same perceptiverse, and we encountered them everywhere, instant signs of mutual recognition being exchanged. To look into their eyes was to peer into a mental landscape utterly familiar to us all.

The sights we saw — I can't encapsulate them in words for you. Perhaps you've shared them, too, and words are unnecessary. The whole world was almost palpably the work of a single hand, a marvel of artistic vision, just as the mystics had always told us.

It was in Nice, I believe, that Elena approached me with her little pill case in hand. She had gone out unexpectedly without me, while I was still sleeping. I didn't complain, being content to sit on the balcony and watch the eternally changing Mediterranean, although, underneath my rapture, I believe I felt a bit of amazement that she had left without a word.

Now, pill case offered in outstretched hand, Elena, having returned, said without preamble, "Here, Robert; take one."

I took the pill and studied its perfection for a time before I asked, "What is it?"

"Matisse," she said. "We're in his native land now, the source of his vision. It's only right."

"Elena, I don't know. Haven't we been happy with Vermeer? Why change now? We could spoil everything. . . ."

Elena swallowed Matisse dry. "I've taken mine, Robert. I need something new. Unless you want to be left behind, you'll do the same."

I couldn't stand the thought of living in a different perceptiverse than Elena. Although the worm of discontent told me not to, I did as Elena asked.

Matisse went down easy.

In no time at all, the sharp, uncompromising realism of Vermeer gave way to the gaudy, exhilarating, heady impressionism of Matisse. The

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transition was almost too powerful to take.

"Oh my God . . . ," I said.

"There," said Elena, "wasn't I right? Take your clothes off now. I have to see you naked."

We inaugurated this new perceptiverse as we had the first.

Our itinerary in this new perceptiverse duplicated what had gone before. Once we had exhausted the features of our hotel room and stabilized our new sensory input, we set out to ingest the world, wallowing in this latest transformation. If we chanced to revisit a place we had been to while in the Vermeer perceptiverse, we were astonished at the change. What a gift, we said, to be able to see the old world with continually fresh eyes.

Listening to the Boston Symphony outdoors along the Charles one night, their instruments looking like paper cutouts from Matisse's old age, Elena said to me, "Let's drop a Beethoven, Robert."

I refused. She didn't press me, realizing, perhaps, that she had better save her powers of persuasion for what really mattered.

The jungles of Brazil called for Rousseau, of course. I capitulated with hardly a protest, and that marked the beginning of the long, slippery slope.

Vermeer had captivated us for nearly a year.

Matisse kept us entralled for six months.

Rousseau — that native genius — could hold our attention for only six weeks.

We were art junkies now, consumers of novel perceptiverses.

Too much was not enough.

The neurotropin industry graciously obliged.

Up till that time, the industry had marketed only soft stuff, perceptiverses not too alien to "reality." But now, as more and more people found themselves in the same fix as Elena and I, the psychoengineers gradually unleashed the hard stuff.

In the next two years, Elena and I, as far as I can reconstruct things, went through the following perceptiverses:

Picasso (blue and cubist), Braque, Klee, Kandinsky, Balthus, Dali, Picabia, Léger, Chagall, Gris, de Kooning, Bacon, Klimt, Delaunay, O'Keeffe, Escher, Hockney, Louis, Miró, Ernst, Pollock, Powers, Kline, Bonnard, Redon, van Dongen, Rouault, Munch, Tanguy, de Chirico, Magritte, Lichtenstein, and Johns.

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We hit a brief period of realism consisting of Wood, Hopper, Frazetta, and Wyeth, and I tried to collect my senses and decide whether I wanted to get out of this trip or not, and how I could convince Elena to drop out with me.

But before I could make up my mind, we were off into Warhol, and everything hit me with such neon-tinted luminescent significance that I couldn't give it up. This happened aboard a station in high orbit, and the last thing I remember was the full Earth turning pink and airbrushed.

Time passed. I think.

The next time I became aware of myself as an individual, distinct from my beautiful yet imprisoning background, Elena and I were in a neo-expressionist perceptiverse, the one belonging to that Italian, I forget his name.

We were outdoors. I looked around.

The sky was gray-green, with a huge black crack running down the middle of it. Sourceless light diffused down like pus. The landscape looked as if it had been through an atomic war. I searched for Elena, found her reclining on grass that looked like mutant mauve octopus tendrils. Her flesh was ashen and bloody; a puke-yellow aura outlined her form.

I dropped down beside her.

I could feel that the grass *was* composed of tendrils, thick and slimed, like queer succulents. Suddenly I smelled alien odors, and I knew the light above spilled out of a novel sun.

The quantum level had overtaken the macroscopic.

Plastic reality, governed by our senses, had mutated.

We were truly in the place we perceived ourselves to be.

"Elena," I begged, "we've got to get out of this perceptiverse. It's just dreadful. Let's go back, back to where it all started, back to Vermeer. Please, if you love me, leave this behind."

A mouth like a sphincter opened in the Elena-thing. "We can't go back, Robert. You can never go back, especially after what we've been through. We can only go forward, and hope for the best. . . ."

"I can't take it anymore, Elena. I'll leave you; I swear it. . . ."

"Leave, then," she said tonelessly.

So I did.

Finding a dose of Vermeer wasn't easy. He was out of favor now; the world had moved beyond him. Even novices started out on the hard stuff

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nowadays. But eventually, in a dusty pharmaceutical outlet in a small town, I found a dose of that ancient Dutchman. The expiration date printed on the packet was long past, but I swallowed the pill anyway.

The lovely honeyed light and the perfect clarity returned.

I went looking for Elena.

When I found her, she was as beautiful as on that long-ago day when we first abandoned our native perceptiverses for the shock of the new.

When she saw me, she just screamed.

I left her then, knowing it was over. Besides, there was something else I had to find.

The pill with my original name.

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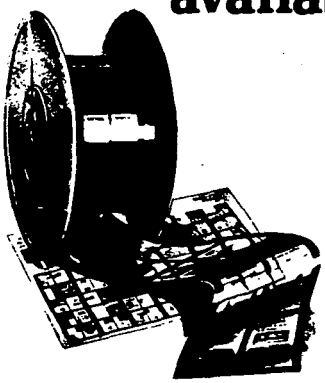

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 29: *In Which Li'l White Lies are Revealed to Be At Least Tattletale Gray*

AMONG THE many readers' letters to the Noble Fermans who edit this magazine, responding to my column before last, in which I asked those who enjoyed these outings to drop a note vouchsafing same as palliative to the incessant bitching of those who *don't* like the cut of my jib (to reassure my employers that *Watching* isn't Ferman's Folly) (about which supportive letters a bit more at the end of this installment), was a lovely note from a woman in Hilton, Pennsylvania, containing a question no one had asked me before. A question that I had to think about for several days before I understood how important it is in setting the cut of my jib. I've waited to answer her here, because I wanted the thoughts and response to be absolutely fresh, since I'm setting down this personal revelation for the first time.

She asked: "You always seem so angry. Perhaps it is your bellicose manner that puts off the readers who write such nasty letters. How is it that you can get so upset about what is, after all, only a movie? Sometimes you seem so filled with rage that I feel the heat through the paper. Wouldn't your comments be just as effective with a little less of the flamethrower?"

Hmmm. And several days more of hmmm. Till I'd thought it out, working diligently to strip my response of self-serving rationalizations. And after much self-examination, this is what I get:

I am no different from any of you in this major attitude: I don't like being lied to.

Like you, I get crazy when some-

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one tells me untruths that serve their ends and in the bargain warp the perception of reality. It is why I despise Edwin Meese, our soon-to-be-dumped Attorney General. He lies about the way we, as a nation, look at erotic material, the family unit, personal ethics, and the role of the government in handling lawlessness. It's why I can abide Billy Graham and lust for an Uzi to silence Falwell and Swaggart and Robertson. The former has a deep and abiding faith in something I may consider arrant superstition, but he seems genuine in his belief and willing to let others carry on their lives without ramming his book down their throats. The latter are self-serving demagogues; tyranny and elitism of the worst sort in their hearts; playing on the fears and prejudices of the gullible who seek succor in a world seemingly deteriorating around them. They lie endlessly, in aid of nothing nobler than divisiveness, with a Salem witch trial methodology that only serves to send their constituency into a tighter downward spiral of hatred, alienation and dependency on the irrational. They lie about the way the world works, and their obfuscations serve not the commonweal, but the demagogues' need for power, and their exchequers.

When we are lied to by a used car dealer or respond to tv advertising and buy a product that is not as represented, the least rancorous of us flails against the walls within our head, and cries for redress. We are lied to by governments, by our elected officials with secret agendas set down by lobbyists, by relatives and friends who think they are doing it "for our own good," but who are, in fact, trying to keep the lake calm for their own journey, and by a business community that deals in floating ethics for the benefit of the bottom line.

We are lied to constantly, in a thousand small ways every day; and the less actively we call them on it, the greater and more easily institutionalized are the lies that follow.

Lying, as a matter of policy, has always been one of the staples of the hype attendant on promotion of films. Some of it is fairly harmless, and even amusing: the bogus biographies of stars, cobbled up in the pr departments of the studios back to the '20s; William Castle's publicity tricks and hyperbole that assured the filmgoer s/he would have a heart attack if s/he sat through the latest Castle offering, and so a nurse and pulmotor squad was in attendance at every screening; the hokey-pokey about 10 YEARS IN THE MAKING! that served to legitimatize ghastly extravaganzas, failing to mention that

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it had taken ten years to unleash the dog because the financing kept falling through.

But other movies have been sold to us, have been judged of note, on the basis of outright whoppers intended to add a patina of social value to otherwise tawdry efforts. These are not the little white lies that we wink at, because they're silly and do no harm—the belief that a western actor actually punched cattle, when in truth the closest he had ever come to beeves was in their T-bone persona, slathered with ketchup—but the actively dishonest representations that coerce us into plonking down our money to see something special because of its origins.

Take, for instance, *The Emerald Forest*, a 1985 film written by Rospo Pallenberg and directed by John Boorman. This was a movie trumpeted in advance of its release as "based on a true story." Its advertising and most of the reviews about the film stressed the following claim:

"He was seven years old when he disappeared from the Amazon damsite where his father . . . was at work . . . For ten years, the father spent every spare moment searching for his son. But when they met again, the boy knew only one father, the chief of the primitive Indian tribe called the 'Invisible People' . . ."

In the film, the father is played by Powers Boothe and the son is portrayed by Boorman's curly-blond-headed son Charley. They are Americans. In the postscript to the excellent Robert Holdstock novelization of the film (New York Zoetrope, 1985), we are told that the father was actually "a Peruvian whose son, Ezequiel, was kidnapped by Indians who attacked the family campsite along Peru's Javari Mirim River." Already we begin to see a fudging of "the true story." And, reluctant to dismiss this sensational story, we accept the dishonesty by saying, "Well, the producers did it because they needed a boxoffice name for the general audience, and using a great Peruvian actor might be more authentic, but we wouldn't enjoy the movie as much as if we can identify with an American, Powers Boothe or whomever."

But, as it turns out, converting the protagonists from Peruvian to Yanks, is nowhere near the core of duplicity used to con us into validating this film as "based on a true story."

SCAN (which stands for Southern California Area Network) is a reference program network set up to field inquiries from area librarians unable to locate answers to reference questions through the usual sources. They publish a splendid newsletter, filled with the re-

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sponses to arcane queries initiated by librarians and other seekers after enlightenment.

In their Sept/Oct 1985 bulletin, Judy Herman, identified as "SCAN Humanities Subject Specialist," pulled the plug on Embassy Pictures and Mr. Boorman. I quote, in part, from her findings:

"Interviews with director John Boorman reported that he had read the story in 'the Times' in 1972, but library systems were unable to find such an account through indexes to the Los Angeles, New York and London *Times*.

"SCAN called the agent for screenwriter Rospo Pallenberg and asked for the citation to story Boorman read in 'the Times.' He said, 'Let me make it clear: Rospo saw the story, not Boorman.'" (And so, another step away from the Given Truth.)

"The agent said he would check with Rospo and get back to us. He didn't, so we called again. He said, 'Let me make it clear: there was no one story the film was based on; it was a conglomeration of several stories. On the advice of our attorneys I cannot say more. If you need more information call Embassy Pictures.'

"Surprisingly, Embassy gave the citation: *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 1972, sec. F, p. 10.

"The L.A. *Times* story is datelined Brazil but all the places mentioned in it are in Peru. It does not name the father, but says he was a Peruvian working as a lumberman 'along the Javari Mirim River, a tributary of the Javari, which lies in Peru.'

"On the radio program 'All Things Considered,' Boorman said that he did not try to contact the father again because the story had been changed so much in the film he didn't feel it *really pertained to this father and son any more* [italics Ellison's], but he had talked to an anthropoligist who had visited the tribe recently and the son was still living with them, now aged about 35." The tribe was called (in the *Times* piece) the Mayorunas.

The SCAN piece concludes with this politely querulous note: "This is rather strange, because an article in *American Indigena* (abril/junio 1975, pp. 329-347) reports on the Mayorunas, with a detailed census by age and sex, and does not mention that one of them was an adopted outsider." Much less a blond-curlyheaded son of either a Peruvian or an American.

Thus, a rational consideration of all the tumult re: "based on a true story" leads any but the most gullible to the conclusion that a writer of fiction, Rospo Pallenberg, was sparked into creating an interesting fiction by an idea proceeding from a news snippet. So far, okay. It was

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then bought or appropriated by Boorman, who sold it to the Embassy honchos as "based on a true story" *he* had read. From that point on, it was never really questioned, and was set on its journey to your wallet by studio flacks who embellished and aggrandized and pumped hot air. And at the terminus, you and I went to that film, amazed at the bizarre and heartrending circumstances transmogrified from Real Life onto the Silver Screen.

We were lied to, and we bought it.

Not that knowing it was principally fabrication, as opposed to slightly-altered-for-dramatic-effect made the film any less a pompous, strutting bore. But the being lied to . . . produces in me and possibly in you, now that you know you bit on it, a genuine anger. Like you, I don't like being made to play the fool.

Or consider such pure fantasies as *Hangar 18* (1980), a Sunn Classic Picture that was sold with the cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-plotz assurance of the producers that this was a movie that revealed the U.S. Air Force had captured a UFO, and that the spacecraft was concealed in Hangar 18 . . . or *Flying Saucer* (1950) that received enormous amounts of publicity as containing actual footage of an Alaskan UFO sighting . . . or *Frankenstein: The True Story* (1973), from a screenplay by Christopher Isherwood, which was no closer to Mary Shelley's novel than most of the other versions of the Modern Prometheus . . . or *Shark's Treasure* (1975), a Cornel Wilde potboiler that made back its nut by advertising that swore you would see live sharks gnawing on happy natives, but which actually used *dead* sharks, pushed up by hand from off-camera . . . or *Ladyhawke* (1985) that swore up'n'down that it was based on a genuine Medeival folktale, and was in fact simply a fictional construct cobbled up in the brain of the modern-day screenwriter . . . or *The Philadelphia Experiment* (1984), that was promoted as being the true story of a World War II battleship that slipped through a hole in time and wound up in the Eighties.

These are lies of a flagrant sort. They treat the audience as if it were populated by morons. At the very least they are films that conciously lie to promote themselves at the cost of spreading more obscurantism and looney beliefs in crap like channeling, "communion" with aliens, crystals, creationism, and a vast array of newly-reborn scams that only serve to alienate an already-befuddled populace from the Real World and the directing of their lives at their own responsibility. At worst, they actively con-

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vince the gullible that they are powerless in the grip of "cosmic forces" that are responsible for their bad luck, lack of a job, fucked-up relationships, and imminent demise from nuclear holocaust or angels with fiery swords.

Thus do I attempt to codify for the kind lady in Hilton, Pennsylvania why "just a movie" can send me into paroxysms of gibbering, thereby producing the flamethrower heat she finds overreactive. I wish I had a more rational answer to that anger—which I try to ennoble by the word "passionate"—but the simple truth as I've been able to perceive it, is that for the time I spend in the grip of a movie, I willingly surrender my disbelief; I am a child again, attending *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* for the first time, and all I ask is: do it to me!

When the film lies, when it loses my trust by any one of a hundred different ineptitudes or flummeries, I respond like a betrayed lover. I fume at *Lethal Weapon* because I know damned well that Mel Gibson would never be able to make that idiotic run down Hollywood Boulevard in his bare feet, because the street is *never* as empty as the film showed it, and the overpass at which he caught up with the fleeing Gary Busey is *miles* away from Hollywood Boulevard, and not even Paavo Nurmi with JATO Addidas could overtake a felon in a speeding car. I rage at *Someone to Watch Over Me* and *Suspect* because cops and lawyers are just flat-out not stupid enough to engage in such behavior that will get them stripped of their badges or disbarred. And if it is *absolutely* necessary for them to act in ways that are so anti-survival, then I can only suspend my disbelief if the scenarist displays a level of artfulness that blows away my perceptions of the Real World and explains it all so I can accept the rationalization. What we're talking about is Art, as opposed to artifice. And when *no* attempt is made to reconcile the unbelievable fictive construct with my common-sense view of reality, then I get angry. Because I've been lied to.

Does that explain it?

Perhaps not. But I swear it's the best I can do.

All of which leads me to the "review" of THE RUNNING MAN (Taft Entertainment Pictures/Keith Barish Productions/Tri-Star), a film both Erick Wajcik of Detroit and Brian Siano of Philadelphia have asked me to discuss in detail. I had actually planned to deal with this latest vehicle for filmdom's leading mesomorph, Arnold Schwarzenegger, rather summarily. But the subject of lying has spread its petals so appealingly, that I think I'll put it

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over to next time, using this installment as a sort of preamble. So keep this screed in mind, and we'll meet back here next month for *Li'l White Lies*, part two. And we'll try to discover if *The Running Man* is actually a ripoff of Robert Sheckley's "The Prize of Peril" and if "The Hidden" is really a ripoff of Hal Clement's *Needle* or just a misappropriation of a 1982 script by Gerald Gaiser called *Alien Cop*.

And I'll try to keep my temper.

ANCILLARY MATTERS:

There are a handful of mythic icons that fantasists and their fans never tire of using or seeing used in stories. Hitler, the Titanic, King Kong, King Arthur, Marilyn Monroe, Jack the Ripper . . . you get the idea. Very likely topping that small list is dinosaurs. You show me a kid or an adult who doesn't get a smile and the shivers when you mention dinosaurs, and I'll show you a kid or an adult who would happily eat lima beans or vote for Pat Robertson. Well, it's not often that we are dazzled by some new variation on the presentation of the saurians, but Celestial Arts (PO Box 7327, Berkely, Ca. 94707) has released a set of four dinosaur posters in their Dinosauria Graphics Series that will absolutely steal your breath away. They're big—24 x 32 inches each—and they come in four flavors: Stegosaurus, Brachiosaurus, Triceratops and Tyrannosaurus. The artwork is by Earl C. Bateman III, each one has a background grid with a metric scale to provide a sense of size, and each one has—are you ready for this—an overprinted skeleton that *glows in the dark!* Each one comes with a nifty little 16-page illustrated booklet that contains the latest skinny on what we know about the saurians, and I've got to tell you that these are knockout posters. And you will love me for turning your attention to the set of four. Even if your spouse or roomie is a lima bean eater, you can pretend you're buying these for some kid's room, and make nocturnal visits to enjoy the glow-in-the-dark skeletons. These are visuals that will make you feel ten years old again.

In my February essay I used the old expresson "liver and lights" and explained that it referred to "the soul and eyes." Well, y'know how you go through years and years of mispronouncing some word you've only read, and never actually heard spoken, and you get it wrong till one day you hear someone say it correctly and you thank your stars that no one ever caught you making a fool of yourself, and thereafter you pronounce it properly? (With me it was the word *minutiae*, but

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that's another story for another time.) I'd been using "liver and lights" for years and always thought it meant the soul and the eyes. I was wrong. As (among others) Jim Bennett of Newport, R.I. and Brad Strickland of Oakwood, Ga. politely pointed out. *Liver and Lights*, as the first pirate or barbarian warlord who used the phrase intended it, meant the liver and *lungs*, the entrails, the 'umbles. Of which said pirate or warlord might make an "'umble pie," or of use to feed his dogs. Jim advised me "lights" is hunters' jargon for "lungs." I hate being wrong, but I love it when I'm set straight. We are all in this together, it seems.

I would be cupidic were I not to confess to just the tiniest hope that my column about those who'd been writing to the Noble Fermans complaining about *Watching* would produce a letter or two of support. I hope you'll believe me when I say that it really was more for Audrey and Ed than for me, because I'm used to the gaff. But even my feeble hope was overcome by the astonishing response. I'm told that the last two columns produced more mail than anything in the history of this venerable publication. And most of it was very pro *Watching* indeed. It would be impossible to thank the hundreds (I'm told) who wrote in, but I've absolutely *got* to thank the following: Chris Blasi, Josef D. Proll, Jane Flowers, Ann Crimmins, Emily Newland, Linda Lee Nigra, Susan Wilson, Sandra Williams, Dennis McKeown, Janet Trumper, Joanna Venneri and Jeanene Ambler. (I hope I haven't misspelled your names . . . the handwriting was a little difficult for some of you.) And I take this opportunity to announce, by way of truth in advertising, that along about June of this year, the publishing house Underwood-Miller will release a large and handsome volume titled HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING. It will contain more than 100,000 words of film reviews all the way back to my high school newspaper account of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and will collect all of these *Watching* installments so far. Maybe they'll take an ad in these pages, so you'll know when it happens. Until that time, thanks all of you.

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Karen Haber's first F&SF story takes place in Paraguay, a country overrun with foreigners, and concerns a native who receives a quite different sort of visitor. Ms. Haber has over eleven years of experience as a nonfiction writer and editor and began writing SF in 1986. She lives in San Francisco with her husband, Robert Silverberg.

Madre de Dios

By Karen Haber

"FOR YOU, A special rate. Twenty dollars for the tablecloth and napkins."

Antonio Morales smiled. He had nice teeth, and the tourists always liked it when he smiled. They always bought more. So Antonio showed them his teeth and let them think they were getting the best part of the bargain.

"How about fifteen?" the lady with the yellow hair said. Her bare, sunburned arms reminded him of plucked chicken wings.

He sat back, arms crossed over his gaudy embroidered shirt, and pretended to consider her offer. He nodded slowly in feigned reluctance. The tablecloth and napkins were worth perhaps ten dollars, he thought.

The lady with the yellow hair and pink pants reached into her white plastic purse, her arm disappearing up to the elbow. She spent some time scrabbling around in it, touching different objects, then withdrew her wallet and handed him the exact amount in guaranies — the local currency — rather than the American dollars he had hoped for.

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Unsmiling now, he thanked her and wrapped the goods in the traditional bright paper.

"I didn't know you got an aurora borealis down here," the North American said.

Antonio glanced out through the ornamental iron grille on the window and saw the blue and green rays of the sunset. They swirled up into the clouds like flames from oily wood. Had he ever really noticed that before?

"Oh, yes, of course," he replied quickly, smiling again. To disagree was bad manners. Bad business, too.

He waved as she drove off with her husband and chauffeur. Antonio shook his head wearily. Tourists and their shiny cars and their native drivers. Where did they come from? Where did they go? He didn't know, nor did he care. He counted the bills again, just to be sure. If only she had paid in dollars — he could get a good exchange rate on the black market.

With luck, the next day would bring more customers. This was not the worst location, on the road to Villarrica. Especially in the spring, he could count on French and English travelers, Americans and Germans. Always Germans, ever since the war. He shook his head in amusement, remembering the ruddy young men and women, squarely built, with fair hair and eyes, speaking Spanish. The new Paraguayans. As long as their relatives came to visit and spent money, Antonio didn't care if they were Venusians.

He hid away the cashbox, closed the shutters, swept the wood plank floor, and straightened the shirts and tablecloths on the shelves. By the time he locked the door of the tiny shop, Antonio's curly black hair was soaked. Rivulets of sweat coursed down his face and the back of his neck, darkening his blue shirt in circular patches. He skinned the moisture from his cheeks with the side of his arm. Although the sun had gone down, the evening air enclosed him like an oven. A storm was coming on. He hated the hot, suffocating stillness that always preceded a summer storm.

In darkness, Antonio walked slowly around the pink adobe house toward the family entrance. He paused to cross himself before the shabby, weathered little memorial shrine near the roadside. *Mi niños.* Already it was a year since the accident. He went slowly through the front hallway into the family quarters.

Inside, the house was quiet and dim. The thick wooden furniture

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looked suddenly unfamiliar. The big table from Asunción cast odd shadows on the plastered walls. Rosa had left one lamp burning before putting the littlest ones to bed. By now she would be sitting up with Carmen. *Pobrecita.* That leg would not heal — and the fever made it so hard for her to sleep. He could imagine the two dark heads bent together over a storybook from the church Sunday school. Two sets of glossy black braids, two pairs of delicate, nimble-fingered hands turning colorful pages that told about saints and miracles.

It was hot in the house. Rosa's embroidered curtains on the windows seemed to keep out what little breeze there was. Meanwhile, every bug in Paraguay seemed to be coming in. Rosa had put a plate for him on the stove. Gratefully, he ate the lukewarm meat and manioc root, dispatching an occasional ant. The sack of maté on the shelf over the sink, and the horn cup beside it, beckoned, but Antonio did not like to drink in solitude. Besides, the herb tea might keep him awake. Rosa would be groggy after caring for the sick one all night, and he, at least, should rest, so he could tend the garden, so he could run the business. To greet the tourists tomorrow. Before ten, Rosa would be sitting in the front room, patiently making the nanduti, sewing the lace in spirals on the rough cotton, to be cut away later, telling her folk stories in thread, for the strangers.

Leaving the plate on the table — Rosa would clear it — Antonio yawned and walked toward the bedroom. He did not remember putting out the lamp, but when he awoke, it was dark in the room. He had almost fallen back to sleep, when he heard a sound.

"Rosa?"

No answer. Her side of the bed was empty. She was still with the children. That sound again — like one of those doors slamming on the cars the tourists drove too fast over the unpaved roads, leaving behind them a cloud of clay dust to coat any damp surface, especially skin. Leaving the men who worked in the fields looking like orange ghosts.

Maybe it wasn't a car. Was Alfredo's goat loose again, chewing on the gateposts? And next, chewing on the corn he and Rosa struggled to raise? Antonio heaved himself off the bed, fumbled with matches until he lit the lamp, and carried it out of the room. By the front door, he grabbed the machete he used for cutting the bananas. He might need it to convince the goat to leave — they were stubborn animals.

He peered out into the opaque night. No goat. *Nada.* The path down to

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The foreigners came and went. Paraguay was filled with them, hiding, seeking, sight-seeing.

the gate was empty. The air was heavy and warm. Thunder rumbled in the distance. He sighed again. Perhaps it had been a car — tourists out late, returning from sight-seeing trips. Tomorrow more of them would come in the bright sunlight, to finger the tablecloths, to point at the goats and peer at the children. They were a nuisance, but they would pay good money for that lace.

So they bought the tablecloth for fifteen dollars instead of twenty. Fifteen dollars would buy a new shovel, five sacks of grain, a month's worth of medicine for Carmen. It was a fortune. And then the rich strangers would go away. Antonio did not wish them well. He had worked for a time as a guard for an American oil company. And before that, for a French company. The foreigners came and went. Paraguay was filled with them, hiding, seeking, sight-seeing. As long as they paid for what they wanted, and went away quickly in their sleek, deadly cars, he would keep his peace with them.

But this was late for tourists. He walked around to the back of the house, toward the clay ovens where Rosa baked the manioc flour.

"Hola — ¿Que es?"

Silence. He called again, but the voice died in his throat when he saw the reflection of light near the oven, where nothing bright should have been reflecting. Fingers shaking, he dropped the machete. The lamp swung crazily, its reflection blinding him. Shadow danced beyond him onto the banana and jacaranda trees. Squinting, he crouched, moved closer, and saw her.

She did not look like a tourist, sitting in the pool of the lamplight, clutching her leg. She raised her head, and he saw that her expression was stubborn yet somehow imploring. She had that pampered look, like a sulky daughter of some hidalgo on her way home from a party. But what was behind her? And how did it get in his backyard?

"Hola. ¿Que tal?" She greeted him in flawless Spanish, unaccented. He didn't respond. She glanced down impatiently at her belt and tried the same greeting in Guarani. Antonio was only slightly surprised. Some foreigners actually did learn the native Indian language, difficult as it was.

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The girl didn't look Paraguayan, but she didn't look like a foreigner, exactly. Brazilian maybe. Or maybe not.

There was something odd about her; he couldn't say what. Perhaps it was her eyes: they were blue-gray, almost purple. She had dark, shoulder-length hair cut in an unfamiliar manner, and a flawless olive complexion. Delicate hands and fingers with long, iridescent fingernails. Her clothing was fluid and all of one piece, pants and shirt. The fabric looked rich, silken, but he could not make out its color. She looked young, although many women in the right light could deceive you about age. But for a moment he was reminded of Carmen and the other little ones.

He stood up, but could not get a clear look at what was causing the reflection behind her. Was it a car? A motorbike? What was it doing back here behind his oven? Every time he tried to look at it, his eyes began to water. So he concentrated on her, averting his eyes from the brightness. And answered her in formal Spanish — Guarani was reserved for people he knew well.

"*Señorita*, why are you here?"

"Forgive me for disturbing your rest. My vehicle has run out of fuel. Can you help me?"

"You are hurt."

"Just a bruise. I tripped."

"Where are you from? Abai? Villarrica?"

Even as he asked, he knew he was being foolish. She must have come from farther away.

"I'm visiting from out of town. And I must get home soon. My parents will be worried."

"There is a gas station in Caacupe, ten kilometers west. You could go there tomorrow. . . ."

"I can't use petrochemicals."

"I don't understand. . . ."

She looked embarrassed and hesitated. Finally, she almost whispered a reply, eyelids lowered, hair hiding her face. "I need a different sort of fuel."

"A different sort of fuel?"

"Fruit or grain would do."

Antonio scratched his head. He wondered what kind of crazy scooter ran on fruit. There had been one loco Englishman whose three-wheeled car had run on alcohol. Tourists and their strange machines. He thought

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of the bananas not yet ripe on the trees. And the three sacks of grain in the storage room. What would be left for his family? Why should he empty his larder for this strange young woman? And why should he care about her problems? In this country, you minded your own business before the government minded it for you. Families helped themselves because they didn't want the kind of help the General would provide. God's help was always appreciated, of course, but not always available.

Why should he get involved? She had awakened him in the middle of the night, a young woman out alone. In the Blessed Virgin's name, where were her parents? He would tell her to go away, that her problem was not his problem.

But she looked up at him with such open, trusting eyes — the look that Carmen would give him when he told her about his boyhood near the Chaco, the look he saw in the eyes of the saints in the church windows on Sunday mornings. She was a stranger — if she walked into Caacupe tomorrow, she would attract too much attention. A young, attractive woman, unaccompanied, always did. A young, attractive foreign woman, alone, asking for curious things, was unheard of. And sooner or later the *pyragues* — the secret police — would find her. Then nobody else would ever be able to find her again.

A slash of lightning cut open the sky above them. Thunder rumbled as the rain began pelting them furiously. Antonio sighed once more. He couldn't leave her to the storm, could he?

"What is your name?"

"Ita."

"Come inside, Ita. My name is Antonio Morales. Come into the house and let me think." She nodded and rose to follow him, limping slightly. Although his clothing was soon dripping wet, she seemed to stay dry. Antonio assumed that her garb was waterproof. But what about her hair? Rosa met them at the door. She drew back, dark eyes huge and suspicious. Grabbing a red shawl from a peg by the door, she drew it around her imperiously, covering her white cotton nightgown.

"Rosa, this is Ita. Her car has run out of gas. Ita, this is my wife, Rosa."

Ita greeted her formally. "I am very pleased to meet you, *señora* Morales. I apologize for this intrusion. You are so kind to shelter me from this rain. I am visiting from out of town."

Rosa nodded stiffly, then pulled Antonio away, into the kitchen.

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In whispers, she hissed angrily at him.

"Are you crazy? Bringing a girl in here in the middle of the night!"

"Rosa, calm down."

"Get her out of here. At least Alfredo has the decency to keep his whores in town."

"Quiet, woman! You will wake the children. You are the crazy one with the suspicions. Bring us towels. And maté."

Rosa glared at him. But she brought the horn cup, the pitcher of water, and the sack of herb tea. Antonio sat at the wooden table, gesturing for the young woman to join him. He infused the tea into the liquid, inserted the metal straw, and sat, drinking pensively. After a while, he offered the mixture to his guest. She smiled and shook her head. Typical tourist, he thought. Afraid of a little tea.

Rosa left the room, a stocky figure stalking furiously toward the back of the house. She returned in a moment with towels, which she flung at Antonio. He offered one to Ita, and although she took it from him, she held it in her lap. A high voice drew Antonio's attention.

"*¿Que es la mujer extranjera?*"

Carmen stood in the bedroom doorway, rubbing her eyes, peering curiously at the visitor. She kicked her bandaged leg back and forth sleepily. Rosa quickly swept the child up, shushing her, and took her back to bed. Antonio turned to the stranger, and saw the lamp cast her blue-green shadow against the wall.

"What is wrong with your daughter, *señor* Morales?"

Such a personal question. No manners. But something compelled him to answer truthfully.

"Her leg is not good. Last year there was an accident, and ever since, she has this problem. Before that, I had four children. Now, two."

The girl looked troubled. She was silent a moment, then she said, "I am sorry for your loss. Can she be cured by medical treatment?"

To rich tourists, price was never a consideration.

"It is too much money."

She frowned. "That is a shame. Your daughter is lovely."

Yes, it was a shame. He missed his children. He hated to see Carmen exhausted and feverish, unable to run and play with her friends. To see Rosa thin, with dark circles under haunted eyes. Carmen's dark-eyed liveliness had been shared with Flora and Ramón, her little sister and brother.

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But the driver had not seen them in time. Now Carmen would be permanently scarred, maybe lame, because she had tried to save them. Just a driver who was late, taking a short cut from Pirebebuy to Yaguaron to pick up his wealthy American boss.

Antonio forced his attention back to the present. The lamp was a glowing ember. He could barely see the girl in the dark, just a faint, silent outline, blue-green. She had produced a cigarette from somewhere, her belt maybe. Some unfamiliar brand of tobacco with a strange, sweet smell. She was using a sleek, arrowhead-shaped lighter, flat, metallic, and sharp-edged. Antonio wondered why he didn't see any flame. As the girl exhaled the smoke, a spider darted across the corner of the table. Idly, she touched the lighter to it. It glowed briefly and vanished, with a thin, high-pitched sound, like air escaping from a balloon. She did not offer Antonio a cigarette. He was relieved when she put the lighter away in her belt.

This Ita with the one name was certainly rude. And strange. She seemed to think that he was obligated to help her, like one of her servants, no doubt. But she was pretty, too, in her peculiar way. And young. If he didn't help her, who would? For all her adult manner and reserve, she did not look much older than sixteen. Her parents would be worried. His children could not return to him now. But he could at least help send someone else's child back to them. And perhaps they could pay for the grain.

He rose from his chair, walked into the storage room, and returned with two bulging cotton sacks. He gestured toward the door, which she opened for him, holding the lamp to light their way. When had she rekindled it, and how, without matches? She was not limping any longer. Outside, a cool breeze was blowing. The rain was barely a trickle. Underfoot, the red clay was spongy. An occasional puddle sparkled in the lamplight as they made their way into the backyard. The sound of water dripping off the great fronds of the banana trees was pleasant and refreshing.

They approached the oven behind the house. Antonio still could not get a good look at her vehicle. Perhaps he was getting old and needed glasses. He handed the sacks to her, ripping them open first. She smiled at him and took some sort of folding funnel from a pocket that he had not noticed. She attached the funnel to the sacks and turned away from him, obscuring her movements. Eyes watering, Antonio watched as best he could, and saw the sacks grow limp. Ita calmly finished her cigarette, then

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ground it out beneath her boot. When she moved, Antonio could not see the cigarette butt. She handed the empty sacks back to him.

"Thank you, *señor* Morales. You have been most hospitable and kind."

Antonio shrugged, suddenly embarrassed.

She lowered her head. "I don't have any money, but I would like to repay you somehow."

He smiled sourly. How could she repay him, if she had no money?

"Just say a prayer to the Virgin for my children's souls. And don't go out alone at night again. Be a good girl, Ita. Go home."

By the time Antonio had awakened, dressed, and eaten, the sun was high in the sky. His head felt thick and heavy. What dreams he had had —about a strange girl and a brightness that hurt his eyes. He heard a buzz and hum, as if from a hundred hornets swarming. His son, Roberto, dashed in the front door, all knees and elbows.

"Papa, have you seen her?"

"Seen who?"

"She is so beautiful!"

"What? Who? Robertino, what are you talking about?"

"Her. The Sainted Virgin. Oh Papa, come see!"

Antonio allowed himself to be tugged from his chair and pulled from the house. Outside, a group of neighbors was gathered in front of his children's shrine, pointing, genuflecting, and weeping. Had the entire town gone crazy?

He pushed his way impatiently to the front of the crowd, stared, and gasped in disbelief at what he saw.

On the wooden doors of the shrine there now was the image of a lovely young woman. She was dressed in rich robes, bathed in a glorious halo of golden light. Her hands were clasped in front of her. Brightness streamed from the sides of the shrine as though it contained something magical.

"Is this some sort of blasphemous joke?" Antonio demanded.

Rosa came running from the house, mantilla floating, face shining, eyes alight. In awe, she crossed herself and sank to her knees in prayer. All around Antonio, the crowd was falling to its knees, whispering of a great miracle — the miracle of the Virgin of the Shrine.

Antonio looked at the image on the shrine again. He saw a young woman: dark hair, downcast eyes, and just the slightest suggestion of

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a smile on her lips. She could indeed be the Sainted Virgin. Or a face from out of his dreams. What had her name been? Ita. He had not dreamed that visit, then. He wondered if she had returned home safely. Wherever home was.

The light coming from the shrine was pulsing, throbbing — it was almost painful to watch. The sound of a car coming up the road distracted Antonio. It stopped just beyond the crowd, and he saw Roberto talking to the driver. A thin, pale North American woman with red hair got out of the car, carrying a camera. She said something to the driver, who also got out and approached Antonio.

"*Señora* wants to know how much."

"*¿Qué?*"

"How much to take a picture of the sacred shrine?"

Antonio's eyes began to gleam. He pretended to think for a moment. Then he told the driver that the *señora* could have her picture for fifteen dollars, *norteamericano*. The driver nodded, told the woman the price, and after they conferred in whispers, he turned back to Antonio.

"She will pay ten."

Antonio Morales gave the tourist woman his broadest grin. "Ten, no. But for you, I will make a special rate, the very best. I will accept twelve dollars in return for taking a photograph of the sacred Virgin of the Shrine."

He understood now. Ita had managed to pay for the grain after all. Just look at that glow! How had she done it? He didn't have time to wonder. In the distance, he could see other cars approaching in a cloud of red dust.

(from page 114)

"Your hand feels real warm, Miz Tuck," said a grinning Charlie Hockelman, holding it like a trophy.

"Her eyes are so pretty," Bobby Sullivan observed with wonder. "Black and shiny. . . ." He thought for a second, and his face beamed as he found the simile. "Like big, bright raisins!"

And Don Reger nodded in agreement, wondering.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

FROM POLE TO POLE

OCCASIONALLY, I HAVE problems I really don't expect.

These days I am writing a weekly science column for the Los Angeles Times Syndicate. (I can hear you say: "My goodness, Asimov, don't you have enough to do without that?" The answer is, "No. I wish I had the strength and ability, as I have the desire, to write all day long, every day.")

Some months ago, in one of these columns, I referred to the new supernova in the Large Magellanic Cloud and said that it was 150,000 light-years away.

I realized that my newspaper audience might not have a quick grasp of what 150,000 light-years was, so I did a little calculation. One light-year is roughly 5.88 trillion (5.88×10^{12}) miles, so 150,000 light-years is about 8.8×10^{17} miles, or nearly 10^{18} miles.

I hesitated to say 10^{18} miles, because I didn't think that that would be easily grasped; nor would "a one followed by 18 zeroes."

It seemed to me that the largest number that could be easily grasped by today's reasonably literate people was a "billion." After all, we know what a billionaire is and we also know that the national debt is now two thousand billion. I decided, then, that the easiest way of presenting the distance of the supernova was to say it was nearly a billion billion miles away.

What I wrote, then, was this: "The light, as it reached us across a gap of 150,000 light-years (nearly a billion billion miles)" — There, I felt I had done everything as neatly as could be expected.

The syndicate sent out the article as I had written it, with the "billion billion miles." I know they did, because I questioned them and they sent me a copy of their version, and there it was.

However, in one of the newspapers that printed the column,

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there must have been some editorial soul-searching. After all, every once in a while a writer somehow manages to repeat a word in a sentence and says, "John gave Mary the the book," or "John gave gave Mary the book." Such a thing is just a careless oversight, so the rewrite man simply omits the extra "the" or "gave" and everyone is happy.

Faced, then, with "nearly a billion billion miles," some rewrite man smiled in a fatherly fashion and did me the favor of leaving out one of the billions, making it read that the supernova, being 150,000 light-years away, was also "nearly a billion miles" away.

The planet Saturn is nearly a billion miles away! The supernova is a billion times as distant.

Conceive, then, my embarrassment when I received a letter from a very intelligent little girl named June Taylor, who explained that she was in the third grade. (And she *was*, for the letter was written on ruled paper in what was clearly a nine-year-old's printing.) In her letter, she carefully went through the calculation of multiplying 150,000 by the number of miles in a light-year and got the right answer.

She then said: "As I have selected your article as a current event for my school work, I would appreciate your clarification."

I was appalled. It's been a long time since I was caught dead to rights by a nine-year-old. Naturally, I wrote a letter, at once, explaining the matter. It took me a considerable time to recover.

Fortunately, in the case of my F & SF series, this can't happen because the Noble Editor always sends me galleys. This doesn't prevent me from making foolish errors because I'm the world's worst proofreader, but at least the errors are my own, and I always find it easier to forgive myself than to forgive others.

Anyway, we're on the subject of magnetism, and I'll now continue.

I ended last month's essay with the problem of why the compass needle pointed north, and why there was such a thing as magnetic dip. The answer was provided by an English physician and physicist, William Gilbert (1544-1603), who spent the last two years of his life as physician to Queen Elizabeth I.

In 1600, he wrote a book entitled *Concerning Magnets* which was full of careful observation and experimentation, so that Gilbert shares with Galileo the popularization of the notion of modern experimental science.

He tested some notions about magnetism by direct experiment. There were some who maintained, for instance, that garlic destroyed the magnetism of a compass needle.

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In those days, it was enough merely to quote some "authority" to that effect. Gilbert got himself a mess of garlic and rubbed it all over a magnet and was able to show that it had no effect on the magnetism whatever.

Others maintained that iron rubbed by diamonds would be magnetized just as though it were rubbed by a loadstone. (Why not? Diamonds are so valuable!) Gilbert went to the expense of obtaining seventy-five diamonds and, in front of plenty of witnesses, used them in various ways to attempt to magnetize iron. It didn't work.

The most important thing he did, however, was to take a large piece of loadstone and fashion a globe out of it. He located the magnetic poles on it and showed that a compass needle would point "north" if placed near the surface of this spherical magnet.

What's more, if he arranged for the compass needle to swivel vertically, it showed magnetic dip, for it pointed straight at the magnetic pole through the body of the object. In fact, if the compass needle was held above the magnetic pole, it pointed straight down.

Gilbert concluded, then, that compass needles acted the way they do not because there is a magnetic iron mountain in the north, but because the Earth is itself a huge magnet.

He was the first to maintain this, and he was correct on the whole, though wrong in details. For instance, he thought that the Earth was literally a large loadstone, but that the surface, through long weathering by wind and water, had lost its immediate magnetic properties except for occasional pieces of unaltered loadstone.

He also committed the very common scientific fault of forcing facts to fit a theory. He assumed that the magnetic poles would coincide with the geographic poles of rotation so that the compass should point to the true north everywhere on Earth, which it clearly didn't. Of course, in Gilbert's time, not much was known about the Earth's arctic regions and still less about its antarctic regions.

Incidentally, the north pole of a magnet is defined as that end of the magnet which turns north. It was afterward discovered that north magnetic poles attract south magnetic poles but *repel* other north magnetic poles. The fact, then, that the north pole of a compass needle points north means that the Earth's magnetic pole in the north is a *south* magnetic pole.

However, no one is going to speak of a south magnetic pole in the far north, and no one is going to switch all the north poles in mag-

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nets into south poles and vice versa. We end up, therefore, with the paradox of having the north magnetic pole of a compass needle attracted to the north magnetic pole of the Earth.

Incidentally, Gilbert's book was not very popular in England, partly because he was a strong proponent of Copernicanism and he used his magnetic findings to argue that the Earth went about the Sun. This was considered preposterous by many scholars who dismissed the book in consequence.

Gilbert's insistence that the magnetic declination (the direction in which the compass needle points) was unchanging was finally disproved by an English astronomer, Henry Gellibrand (1597-1636). He carefully recorded the direction in which compass needles pointed and, in 1635, published his findings. He showed that in the past half-century, magnetic declination in London had shifted by seven degrees. The angle of the magnetic dip also changed. (Even the intensity of the Earth's magnetic field changes with time, we now know.)

The reason for the change in magnetic declination and magnetic dip was a mystery. There was even some speculation that there might be *four* magnetic poles on Earth. In 1698, the English astronomer Edmund Halley (1656-1742), of later "Comet Halley" fame, was sent off on an ocean voyage to discover, if he could, an east and west magnetic pole. It was the first ocean voyage designed for a specifically scientific purpose, and not for exploration. However, Halley did not find the additional poles since they were not there to find.

It would help, of course, if we could find out where the magnetic poles of Earth were actually located.

About 1830, the German mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss (1777-1855), making use of observed compass measurements, calculated that Earth behaved as though there were a very powerful bar magnet buried in its center.

He showed that this bar magnet was *not* set parallel to the axis of Earth's rotation. This was the first indication that Earth's magnetic poles were *not* located at the Earth's geographic poles. Instead, the so-called "geomagnetic axis" passed through the center of the Earth, making an angle of 12 degrees to the rotational axis.

Gauss calculated that the north geomagnetic pole was located at 78.5 degrees North Latitude and 70 degrees West Longitude. This is located in Hayes Peninsula in northwestern Greenland, just 35 kilometers north of the American base

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at Thule, and about 750 kilometers from the north pole.

The south geomagnetic pole would be at precisely the opposite side of the globe, 78.5 degrees South Latitude and 110 degrees East Longitude. This is deep in Antarctica, very nearly at the maximum distance from the ocean and, therefore, at the region of greatest cold, where the Soviet base Vostok is established. (This is pure coincidence, of course.) It is 750 kilometers from the south pole.

Once Gauss had established where the geomagnetic poles ought to be in theory, one of the goals of polar expedition came to be the confirmation of this. Explorers wanted to find that spot in the Arctic where the north pole of the compass needle pointed straight down and that spot in the Antarctic where it pointed straight up, and see how close Gauss had gotten with his theoretical calculations.

It was quickly discovered that, in the Arctic at least, Gauss's calculation was way off. It came to be clear that the "north magnetic pole" was not at the north geomagnetic pole. In fact, the north magnetic pole wasn't even in Greenland.

The Scottish explorer James Clark Ross (1800-1862) discovered the north magnetic pole on June 1, 1831. It was on the western shore of Boothia peninsula at 70.85 degrees North Latitude and 96.77 degrees West Longitude. This point is located in the northernmost extension of the North American continent and is 110 kilometers southwest of Gauss's north geomagnetic pole, and fully 2100 kilometers from the north pole itself. (The distance between the north magnetic pole and the north pole is equivalent to that from New York City to Dallas, Texas.)

The south magnetic pole seemed a much harder nut to crack. It seemed certain to be somewhere in the body of Antarctica, and no one had yet managed to penetrate the continent. They were merely nosing about the icy coastlines.

In 1840, however, a French explorer, J.S.C. Dumont d'Urville (1790-1842), was sailing along the Antarctic shore and found a section where the compass needle pointed nearly straight upward. He knew he was fairly close to the south magnetic pole though not right on it.

By 1909, exploration parties were beginning to penetrate Antarctica, and one of them, under an Australian explorer, Edgeworth David (1858-1934), located the south magnetic pole, 250 kilometers inland from the western shore of the Ross Sea. It was at 72.42 degrees South Latitude and 155.27 degrees East Longitude. It was about 1400 kilometers north-

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Maxwell showed that it was impossible to have electricity without magnetism, and vice versa.

east of Gauss's south geomagnetic pole and 1600 kilometers from the south pole itself.

To make matters more complicated, both magnetic poles *move*. Since its discovery, the north magnetic pole has moved 500 kilometers closer to the north pole, while the south magnetic pole is moving away from the south pole and is now almost exactly on the Antarctic shore where Dumont d'Urville would have discovered it, if he had come at the right time.

What's more, the "magnetic axis," that is, the line passing through the Earth from pole to pole, from the north magnetic pole to the south magnetic pole, does *not* pass through the center of the earth. It misses the center by no less than 110 kilometers.

So you see, there are a number of questions about the magnetic poles. Why are they so far from the geographic poles? Why do they move? Why aren't they on exactly opposite sides of the globe?

Most of all, why is the intensity of the field changing?

Since 1800, the intensity of Earth's magnetic field has declined by about ten percent. If this goes on, then in a couple of thousand years, it will decline to zero and then reverse, so that the north magnetic pole of the compass needle will begin to point southward. This has happened a number of times in Earth's history, with such "magnetic reversals" taking place at very irregular intervals. No one knows why.

Let's think about magnetism. Why does iron behave so differently from other materials? In the course of the 19th Century, it became clear that electricity and magnetism were closely allied, that electric currents could show magnetic properties and that magnets could produce electric currents. The laws governing the properties of the "electromagnetic field" were worked out between 1864 and 1873 by the Scottish mathematician James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879). He showed that it was impossible to have electricity without magnetism, and vice versa.

Every substance is made up of atoms. Every normal atom has, in its outskirts, electrons. Every electron has an electric charge and is, therefore, a small magnet.

Electrons have something called "spin," and the spin can be in either one direction or the opposite direc-

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tion. If an atom has an even number of atoms, half spinning in one direction and half in the other, the magnetic effects tend to cancel out.

If there is an odd number of electrons, at least one is not going to be in balance. Sometimes, even with an even number, two may be unbalanced. In that case, atoms and the material made up of them will show weak magnetic effects.

In some cases, there is a tendency for the imbalance in the electrons of many atoms to line up in the same direction, so that the magnetic effects pile up. Such a substance can exhibit strong magnetic properties. Loadstone, a naturally occurring oxide of iron, is an example.

Ordinary iron has "domains," within which large numbers of atoms with unbalanced electrons line up. The individual domains, however, point in every possible direction and cancel each other out. If iron is stroked with loadstone, the domains are all pulled into the same direction and the iron becomes strongly magnetized. Once the loadstone is removed there is a tendency for the domains to move into different directions and the magnetism is lost. Iron tends to be a "temporary magnet."

The iron atoms in steel are held more tightly and, once they are stroked into the same direction, cannot easily move out of alignment again. Steel, therefore, tends to form a "permanent magnet."

This ability to line up vast numbers of unbalanced electrons to produce a strong magnetic effect is called "ferromagnetism," the prefix coming from the Latin word for "iron."

Although iron is by far the most common substance that displays ferromagnetism, it is *not* the only one. There are two metals that are very like iron, chemically, and these are nickel and cobalt. Both of them are ferromagnetic and will be attracted by a magnet.

All this seems to strengthen the view that the Earth's magnetic field is based on a central core of iron. After all, some seven percent of the meteorites that fall are a mixture of iron, nickel and cobalt in a ratio of 90, 9 and 1, and they may be remnants of central cores of asteroids. There is no doubt that iron is the most common of the more complex elements of the Universe, and the density of the Earth, as a whole, fits the thought that there is a large nickel-iron core at the center.

Of course, that doesn't explain why the magnetic poles are off center, move about, and so on, but those are little details that can be taken care of later — were it not that the iron-core theory falls apart altogether for the following reason:

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A ferromagnetic substance retains its strong magnetic properties as long as its atoms are held firmly in place in such a way that the unbalanced electrons are all lined up. At any temperature, though, the atoms are vibrating, and the higher the temperature, the more vigorously they vibrate. Eventually, if the temperature is sufficiently high, the atoms are vibrating energetically enough to slip their moorings and, with their electrons, begin to take on all sorts of random positions.

This was demonstrated to be so in 1895 by the French chemist Pierre Curie (1859-1906), who, in that same year, married Marie Sklodowska, who was to become the famous Madame Curie. The temperature at which ferromagnetic substances lost their ability to be ferromagnetic (the "Curie temperature") varies.

The Curie temperature of nickel is 358 C., that of iron is 770 C., and that of cobalt is 1131 C.

Oddly enough, there is a fourth ferromagnetic element, one that is not chemically related to these so-called "iron elements." The fourth ferromagnetic element is gadolinium, one of the rare earth metals, but only gadolinium seems to be ferromagnetic. (Please don't ask me why.) Its Curie temperature is only 16 C (60 F), so that on a chilly day, gadolinium will be attracted by a magnet but as the day turns fairly mild, the metal will drop off.

The business of the Curie temperature seems to knock the iron-core theory of Earth's magnetism for a loop. The latest determinations show that the metallic core of the Earth is at a temperature of 3500 C. at its outermost rim. That temperature goes up steadily to one, at the very center, of 6600 C. All of it, then, every bit of it is far above the Curie temperature of any known substance, which means that the center of the Earth is simply not a magnet in the ordinary sense of the word.

Why, then, does the Earth have a magnetic field?

The German-American physicist Walter Maurice Elsasser (b. 1904) feels that the answer may lie in electromagnetism. In 1939, he suggested that the Earth's rotation sets up slow eddies in the iron core, which is hot enough to be liquid (except perhaps, at the very center, where high pressure keeps it solid). A moving electric conductor sets up a magnetic field, and it is that which we experience.

Of course, we should expect the eddies to be parallel to the direction of rotation, so that the magnetic axis will be lined up with the axis of rotation. This isn't so. The magnetic poles are far from the geographic poles; the magnetic poles

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move, and the line from pole to pole does not pass through the Earth's center. No doubt these asymmetries can eventually be explained, but what that explanation may be, I don't know.

Then, too, we might suppose the magnetic intensity decreases or increases according to whether the speed of swirl decreases or increases. Right now the liquid iron core is swirling more and more slowly. Eventually, it will come to rest and the magnetic field will disappear. Then, it will begin swirling in the opposite direction, and the magnetic field will reverse itself.

But why does the swirl decrease and increase? If the Earth always turns from west to east, why would the liquid core swirl with the Earth's rotation at some times and against it at other times? We don't know —or, at any rate, *I* don't know.

We can test other heavenly bodies, however. If Elsasser is correct, there are two things necessary for a planetary magnetic field. First, there has to be a liquid core capable of carrying an electric current. Second, there must be a period of rotation fast enough to set up swirls in that liquid.

Earth meets both requirements. The Moon, on the other hand, meets neither. From its low density, we know that it is rock all the way through, and it is simply not hot enough at the center to melt that rock (rock has a higher melting point than iron has). Even if the rock were molten, it would not carry an electric current. On top of that, the Moon rotates on its axis, relative to the Universe generally, in 27 1/3 days, rather than in one day, as Earth does.

The result of all this is that you wouldn't expect the Moon to have a magnetic field — and it doesn't.

How about Mars? Like the Earth, it rotates on its axis pretty quickly — 24 1/2 hours. To be sure, it's a distinctly smaller body than Earth is, so that its speed of rotation is not much more than half that of Earth, but it is fast enough to set up swirls.

Or it would be fast enough to set up swirls if there were something to swirl. Mars's density is low enough so that we can conclude it has little or no liquid metal core, and, therefore, despite its rapid rotation, it should have no magnetic field — and it doesn't.

Venus is almost as large as Earth and almost as dense as Earth. It undoubtedly has a liquid metal core, and the liquid metal is surely iron. So far, so good — but Venus has a period of rotation of 243 days, the slowest period of rotation in the Solar system. That's not enough to produce a set of swirls despite its liquid iron core. It should, therefore,

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have no magnetic field to speak of — and it doesn't.

Jupiter is made up almost entirely of hydrogen, with a little helium thrown in. There may be a solid ball of rock and metal at the very core — quite small in comparison to Jupiter itself, but, for all we know, as large as Earth. We just don't know enough about Jupiter's interior to be able to tell.

However, suppose that Jupiter is largely hydrogen. Under the huge pressure at the center, the hydrogen is in metallic form. That means the single electron of the hydrogen atom is loosely held and the hydrogen can carry an electric current easily.

In addition, Jupiter has a very rapid rotation rate of just under 10 hours despite the fact that it must turn through a circumference eleven times that of Earth. There is thus a liquid material at its center capable of carrying a current and a rate of rotation that should make it swirl like crazy. It should not only have a magnetic field; it should have an extremely intense one.

And it does. It's magnetic field, measured by probes that skimmed past the planet, is some 19,000 times as intense as the Earth's.

Probes have also measured the magnetic fields of Saturn and Uranus, the properties of which are like those of Jupiter, though less extreme. Uranus's magnetic field is only 50 times as strong as Earth's. Its magnetic axis is tipped no less than 60 degrees to the rotational axis, and the center of the magnetic axis misses the geographical center of the planet by a full 8000 kilometers.

We have not yet had a chance to measure the magnetic field (if any) of Neptune, but I'm sure that no astronomer doubts it has one.

The Sun, like the gas giants, apparently has a conducting interior, and though it rotates only once in 26 days, its huge size makes the rotation rate fast enough for swirls. Hence, there is a strong magnetic field, as is evidenced by the Sunspots, if nothing else.

That leaves Mercury. It is a small planet, smaller than Mars, though larger than the Moon. It is, however, just about as dense as Earth. Considering that it is smaller and that its central regions must therefore be less compressed than Earth's are, we can assume not only that it must have a metallic core, but that the core is probably a bit larger in proportion to its overall size than the Earth's is.

However, Mercury rotates slowly, only once in 59 days. It is not as slow a rotator as Venus, but it is slower than the Moon, and it should not turn quickly enough to swirl the metallic core. So it should not

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have a magnetic field. But it does. Just a weak one, but a more intense one than you would expect.

My own feeling is that there is just a chance that small Mercury has a central temperature that is cool enough to allow a little ferromagnetism. It doesn't seem likely, but perhaps there's just a chance.

In any case, there's a great deal about astronomical magnetic fields that people do not understand.

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James Morrow wrote "Spelling God With the Wrong Blocks" (May 1987). His 1986 novel, THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS, was a Nebula finalist and the second place winner of the John W. Campbell Award, and will soon be out in paperback from Ace Books.

The Eye That Never Blinks

By James Morrow

UNBLINKING, THE DISEMBODIED eye stared at Pothinos from within its pyramid of ice.

"What kind of fish?" he asked defensively, rising from his desk. Even a prince among biologists, as Pothinos surely was, could not be expected to identify a species on the evidence of a single organ.

"Hunt it in every zoology text ever written, and you will not find it," said his youthful visitor, a collection of nervous gestures in expensive clothes. He had given his name as Sebastian W. Stragon, but from the aristocratic cut of him, there should have been either a "Lord" at the beginning or a roman numeral at the end.

Issuing a quick little *brrrup*, Maxie the cat jumped on the desk and pranced toward the frozen eye. "Why bring it here?" Pothinos asked.

"You must work your cleverness on it." Stragon's sweeping arm seemed to encompass the entire Institute for Quantum Biology. "As I understand your enterprise, you can fashion an adult cimberfish from one tiny particle of this eye."

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Maxie's tongue stroked the ice pyramid. The creature had the persistence of Thomas Edison; left alone, Pothinos knew, she would eventually lick her way in. "There are easier ways to get a fish, Mr. Stragon." Crossing the lab, Pothinos absently tossed some mummified ants into the turtle's terrarium. "Try a trout stream. Or a pet store."

"There are no easier ways to get *this* fish," lamented Stragon, tugging his thick golden hair as if to dislodge a toupe. He shooed the cat away. "Naturally I intend to reward you." From his silk vest Stragon produced a check, waving it before Pothinos like a hypnotist's pendulum. He had already filled it out and added his signature; adjacent to Pothinos's name, an astonishing quantity of zeros trailed from the numeral 5 like spots on a python.

"Cimberfish?" said Pothinos, stifling a gasp. The hell with grant applications when half a million dollars lay right there in the lab, waiting to be claimed. "Never heard of a cimberfish."

The ice pyramid was melting now, puddling onto the gold salver. "Some fish live in the sea" — a lurid pause — "and others live in Satan's blood." Stragon moved his lips oddly, as if trying to remember how a smile went. "Yes, doctor, beyond the mists of reason lie truths you will never know."

Pothinos winced internally, grinned on the surface. For a cool half-million he was willing to endure almost anything, even Stragon's pieties.

The intruder repocketed the check and extended an anxious index finger toward the vacuum footlocker from which the eye had come. He's testing me, Pothinos thought. Daring me to make him pack up his bizarre trophy and leave.

"Bring it here." Walking past heaps of cryule vials and titer boxes, Pothinos opened the main freezer and, pushing aside the tissue cultures, cleared a space for the unblinking eye.

"Your reputation circles the earth," said Stragon, starting forward, salver in hand. "When I heard how you violated that rabbit" — he set the ice pyramid in the freezer — "unraveling its life-strands, making rabbit after rabbit as would God himself, I knew that my search had ended." He closed the door and pressed the check into Pothinos's palm. "Regard the present sum as a down payment. You'll receive an identical amount when the cloning is accomplished. Have we a bargain?"

The check's design, as elegant as Stragon himself, suggested an il-

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luminated medieval manuscript. Was this callow aesthete deranged, or merely eccentric?

"A saltwater fish?" asked Pothinos.

"Fresh," said his patron.

A week later the thing was born. Strange, the ways of parthenogenesis. Who, looking at that mundane and bloated eye, would have predicted anything this delicate, this decorous, this weird? The cimberfish's red scales flashed like embedded rubies. Its fins put Pothinos in mind of oriental kites.

"Beautiful," gasped Stragon when he first beheld the completed clone navigating its circular universe. "Simply beautiful."

Pothinos's patron had been adamant. The moment the procedure bore fruit, Pothinos must contact him, day or night, which is why the men now stood before a glass fishbowl shortly after three on a Sunday morning.

"You can't imagine how long I've waited." Stragon caressed the glass bowl as he might a lover's thigh. "Don't worry — the rest of your fee is ready. But indulge me for a moment, will you?"

At present rates of pay, Pothinos was prepared to indulge Stragon for considerably longer than a moment. "Yes. . . ?"

"Where in this vicinity might a man go fishing?"

"Fishing? It's not my sport."

"Nor mine." Stragon hugged himself, as if to defeat a chill.

"What do you hope to catch? Another cimberfish?"

"No . . . something else. Any old fishing hole will do."

Pothinos told Stragon of Lake Rosamond, where his colleagues often hooked morose, sharp-whiskered catfish during lunch hour. "A ten-minute walk through the woods," he explained.

"Are you up for a little noctural angling?" Stragon asked.

"Me?"

"I would prize your company."

"You mean . . . now?"

"Now. A fishing trip." Stragon's large, glossy eyes widened. "I don't want to go alone."

"Aren't they more likely to bite at dawn?"

"I cannot wait that long."

Like an antineutrino, Maxie appeared out of nowhere, dipping her paw

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in the fishbowl and eliciting from Stragon a scream so loud that Pothinos thought the glass might shatter. Instantly he snatched up the cat, tossing her into the hall.

"Fishing?" Emphatically Pothinos shut the lab door. Why not? What did Stragon's madness matter, so long as his money remained such a deep and luxurious green? "It's been years since I went fishing. . . ."

In the moonlight a vast automobile gleamed blackly, a low mist lapping at its tires. A chauffeur stood by the rear door; his beatific smile and steady posture seemed to Pothinos incongruous in a man employed by one so haunted as Stragon.

"Tonight I shall travel by foot, George," Stragon explained, showing the chauffeur the glass bowl. Drifting placidly amid the perturbations, the cimberfish had evidently come to terms with its newfound existence.

"I am most happy for you, sir," said George. Fog crawled up his body like ivy ascending a trellis.

The chauffeur opened the trunk, removing a fishing rod of manifestly recent and costly design. A gold filament joined the hook to a large, gleaming reel whose housing proclaimed, in capital letters, that seven ball bearings lay within. If Stragon failed to hook a fish that night, it would not be for lack of proper technology.

"Good fishing, sir," said George.

"One catch will do," the young man noted, securing a tackle box from the front seat. He handed Pothinos the cimberfish. "One more miracle is all I need."

The fog lifted as Pothinos's patron led him away from the Institute for Quantum Biology. Moonlight poured into the warm woods. Cradled in Pothinos's arms, the glass bowl glistened as the cimberfish circled.

"In my adolescence," Stragon began his story, shifting the fishing rod from one shoulder to the other, "I pursued a life of travel and adventure, and one bleak, gnarled autumn I found myself in a woods reminiscent of the one in which we now walk. Europe was more cosmopolitan in those days, more like a single country, and typically one came upon a French priest in a Spanish garden, or, as in the instance I am about to relate, an Italian scholar in a German forest. The scholar's predicament — that *was* unusual. Such a vicious way to die, being sucked into a swamp like that, the quicksand filling him up like seed forced into a goose. I was never

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I baited my hook, threw out my line . . . and wished for a fortune.

particularly agile, but somehow I pulled him out."

Fat birds brooded in the trees. Pothinos half expected some winged predator to swoop down and snatch the cimberfish away.

"Immediately the scholar proposed to reward me," Stragon continued. "Reaching into his knapsack, he drew forth a jar containing three beautiful, crimson fish, swimming round and round. Joy surged through me. Exotic pets fetched a high price then. Innocent that I was, I failed to read the scholar's face correctly, failed to note the gleam in his eye as he explained that these three cimberfish, as he called them, were the only ones in the universe. I would be foolish to sell them, he insisted. No, instead I must acquire a fishing rod, and I must bait my hook with a cimberfish, and upon casting out my line I must make a wish over the water."

Glazed with moonlight, Lake Rosamond came into view. Mist drifted across its surface like steam rising from a crock of soup.

Make a wish? mused Pothinos. Had Stragon ordered up the cimberfish merely to illustrate a fairy tale?

Opening his tackle box, Stragon took out several sinkers and a phosphorescent bobber, which he promptly attached to his line.

"I did as the scholar instructed," he went on, "borrowing a rod from my uncle and setting off for the sea. A day's walk brought me to Lubeck Bay. What does a young man wish for? Love, you guess? Wrong, for love embraces only the possibility of itself, whereas wealth can purchase many things, including — let us not be sentimental, doctor — love. I baited my hook, threw out my line . . . and wished for a fortune."

"Did you have to wait long?" Pothinos asked.

"Barely a minute."

Stragon plunged his hand into the glass bowl, gripping the cimberfish and lifting it free. Mercilessly he impaled it on his hook. A crude way to treat such a rare and valuable creature, but evidently this step was essential.

"I caught a manta ray," Stragon said, "its great flaps covered with fabulous designs. Upon gaffing it, I dragged it on shore and slit it open."

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"*Slit* it?"

"As my instincts bade."

"Were your instincts correct?"

Stragon nodded. "The ray contained the shredded corpse of my cimberfish . . . and something else."

"Let me guess." Pothinos choked down his sarcasm. "Money."

"A fortune in precious gems. The descendants of those gems — the profits on the investments that they bought — have enabled me to pay you so royally for your talents."

After casting out his tethered cimberfish, Stragon climbed onto a large rock that jutted into Rosamond like a pier and sat down.

"Given my success with the first cimberfish," he resumed, "barely a month went by before I was at it again. This time I tried the river that cut through my grandfather's farm in Bavaria. What good are riches if the Reaper comes? Hence, my second wish was, simply, to live forever. When I opened my catch — a wondrous eel with skin like wet silk — a glass phial rolled onto the ground. For several days I struggled with myself, eventually resolving to drink what the phial contained, a warm, sour liquid that indeed proved to be the elixir of life."

Mosquitoes fidgeted around Stragon's bobber like a hundred satellites orbiting a planet.

"How old are you?" Pothinos inquired cautiously, stepping away from the rock as if his patron's imagination might be infectious.

"When did the Wars of the Roses begin?"

"The what?"

"Wars of the Roses."

"I don't know. Five centuries ago."

"I was twelve at the time."

Pothinos thought of his sister Lucinda — how she had walked into his bedroom on his seventeenth birthday and informed him that the Split Pea with Ham People had just arrived from Betelgeuse to make her Secretary-General of Disneyland. This was different. Stragon's tale had a coherence that bespoke sanity if not truth. He did not wander, as the mad do; his arguments contained no abrupt shifting of gears, as Lucinda's always did. But why all this pointless fantasy?

A sharp breeze moved across the lake, cutting twists and zags in the water. Pothinos fixed on the bobber, the cynosure of his patron's scheme.

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Occasionally Stragon pulled back on the rod, moving the bright sphere and animating the half-dead bait.

"One whole cimberfish left," Stragon continued his story, "yet I could not settle on a third wish. Wealth and eternal youth: what more does a man need? I nurtured the remaining bait as best I could, keeping it alive as a kind of insurance policy. Even after the fish died, I sought to retard its putrefaction by soaking it in alcohol. Years passed. Decades. By the time I realized what my third wish might be — *must* be — it was too late. Nothing remained but an eye. I packed the organ in ice and set off on my quest."

The bobber, still afloat, sent tendrils of light across the lake. Against his better judgment, Pothinos wondered what his own third wish might have been. The mending of his sister's mind? A Nobel Prize? Or was he darker than that — the ruin of a colleague?

"I took to haunting fishing wharves," narrated Stragon. "Zoos. Circus sideshows. Any place where a cimberfish might turn up. Useless. I went fishing often, dissecting whatever I caught. Empty. To catch your fondest desire, you need the right bait." Stragon pulled the promised payment from his vest and thrust it toward Pothinos. "And then, just when I had abandoned hope, you and your cleverness came into the world."

"I suppose that my goal," said Pothinos, taking the check, "after wealth and long life, would be for my sister to—"

"Look!" Ecstasy seized Stragon. "There!" Rising, he jammed the rod handle into his stomach. "I've got him!" He cranked the reel backward, filling the night with the stately buzz of its bearings. "Good God, I've got him!"

Pothinos studied Rosamond. The bobber had vanished.

"Here I am!" screamed Stragon. "Right here!"

Sinewy blackness crashed out of the lake, shattering its surface like a panther diving through a mirror. A fish, yes, but one whose anatomy —slimy body, hatchet fins — seemed merely its mouth's way of getting from one place to another.

Pothinos's intestines writhed around themselves. His brain shivered in his skull.

"I wish for it to end!" screamed Stragon. His hand moved frantically, reeling in the fetid, organic cave. Such a maw: pulpy lips, gums like rotten logs, fangs thrusting downward like stalactites. "Hear me, fish? I want it to be over!"

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Through the haze of his astonishment, Pothinos apprehended his patron's pain. *Over.* Yes, of course, the poor bastard wanted out, no more curse of immortality, no more standing by as his loved ones marched down the cold stone road to the tomb, leaving him behind.

Relentlessly, Stragon's catch cruised toward shore, its eyes stroking the darkness like beacons marking the coast of hell. Even as Pothinos drew back — what an extraordinary event! what a dazzling piece of data! — his patron hurled down the fishing rod and jumped into the shallows.

"Over!"

A snap, a fat spasm of movement, and the wish was complete. Bait gone. Mouth gone. Stragon gone.

Rosamond grew still, as if a blast of winter had sealed it with ice. Pothinos stood on the silent shore, vibrating with shock, gulping down air to feed his racing heart.

Slowly he picked up Stragon's abandoned fishing rod. He turned and staggered from the scene of the . . . the what? *Miracle.* The word sounded eerily correct.

Or was it just a trick? In a few seconds Stragon would be at his side, pointing at him, snickering?

No: the Rosamond beast was truly *outre;* tonight Pothinos had glimpsed the universe's secret smirk, row upon row of strange teeth flashing somewhere beyond the knowable. A miracle: then he must move with deliberation. Exactly how many cimberfish cells lay back at the Institute? A hundred million? Easily. A hundred million potential wishes, each a glint in its parent's unblinking eye. No: more. He could clone the clones, clone the clones of the clones! Endless wishes, spiraling to the edge of reality like interstellar dust!

An owl's hoot blasted through the woods like a landlocked foghorn. Careful, Pothinos told himself. Take it easy. Beware the rub.

Wish-makers, he saw, traditionally committed the same error. Each used the gift to improve his own situation, and, succumbing to greed, quickly came to ruin. Ah, but suppose the wish-maker never benefited himself? Suppose all Pothinos's desires went toward fashioning some separate, distant world? What a fine, flawless creation he might make; blue skies, green continents, a marvelously complex biosphere. Yes, it could be done, the fallacy outflanked, the rub circimvented, power both

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absolute and uncorrupting, yes, yes, yes. . . .

Pothinos ran. Dawn washed across the dark sky, conjuring fir trees and brick buildings from the gloom.

Defrosting the eye was the simplest of procedures. A moment to prepare the hot plate, a moment to thaw the surrounding ice. When Pothinos reached into the puddle to remove the cimberfish's remains, Maxie strutted over and wove amid his legs as if decorating a maypole.

Pothinos pulled away, leaving the animal startled and miffed.

Was this truly the right course?

Arching her back, Maxie meowed.

Yes, this was right. The age of miracles, thank God, was over. A biologist, anyone, must live in his own time.

"Make a wish, Maxie!" Pothinos shouted, and he rolled the eye across the floor to the waiting and hungry cat.

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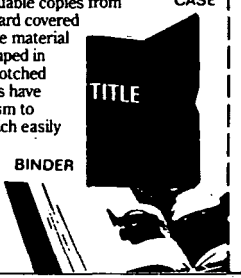

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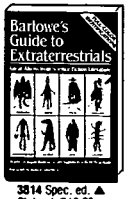

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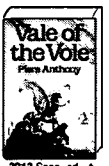

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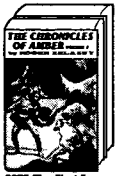

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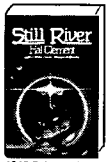

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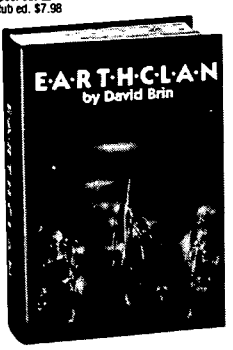

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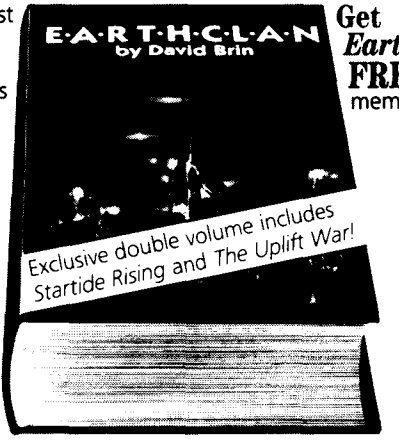

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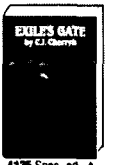

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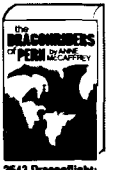

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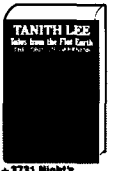

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